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Triangle

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Triangle

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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B.A. Quinnipiac University, 2005
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Abstract

In the Lower East Side of New York City from 1909 through 1911 a fight for change was taking place. Jewish immigrant girls put their safety on the line and brought attention to the abuse taking place in factories across the country. They first spoke out and led the Ladies' Garment Worker strike bringing attention to their cause. But it was ultimately their untimely deaths in one of the most tragic workplace disasters ever in history that finally spurred the country to action in passing new fire safety and child labor laws.

Historical Fiction, Immigration Story, 1911, Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, Ladies Garment Worker Strike, 1909

Chapter One

January 1905- St. Petersburg, Russia:

Abraham leaned forward in the wooden kitchen chair and slammed his cards down on the table.

“Rummy! That's three in a row.”

Ruth blew out a loud breath. “Only because you cheated!”

“I did not!” Abraham looked back at his best friend. “Come on, Jeremiah, back me up here.”

“He won fair and square, Ruth,” Jeremiah said without looking up from where he was reading in the rocking chair in the corner of the room by the window. “And stop dragging me into the middle of your squabbles.”

“Fair? It's never fair. As my brother you should take my side, but instead you two *momzers* always gang up on me,” Ruth said.

With a sigh Jeremiah got up and crossed the room to put a hand on Ruth's shoulder. “No one likes a sore loser. You keep it up and Abraham is not going to want to come over anymore.”

Abraham crossed his arms behind his head and leaned back smugly. As his chair tilted back a card fell out from behind him.

“See?” Ruth yelled. “Look at him, the *gonif*. I told you he cheated!” She scooped up a pile of cards and threw them at him.

Abraham laughed and held up his hands in mock surrender. Jeremiah grabbed Abraham's head under his arm and boxed Abraham's ear.

“How am I supposed to back you up if you make me a liar when I do?” Jeremiah asked.

“Ow, ow. I give up.” Abraham jumped from the chair to pick up his fallen kippah from the floor. He placed it back on the top of his head, secured it, and flashed Ruth a wide grin.

There was a knock at the front door. Abraham and Jeremiah turned immediately serious and

exchanged worried looks.

“That'll be Mark.” Jeremiah nudged Abraham. “It's time to go.”

“But Da will be home from work soon.” Ruth said. “And Abraham's family is coming over for supper. Where are you going?”

“Ah, I think Da is working late today,” Jeremiah said, glancing over at Abraham. “And so is Abraham's dad.”

“But they never work late. And how is that even possible? I thought the czar's soldiers closed down the public areas after dark because of the strikes. They'd have no one to peddle their goods to.”

Abraham sighed. “All right, they're not working late. They're meeting up with us somewhere. We have business to take care of with Father Gapon. Nothing to concern yourself with.”

“What kind of business do two Jewish boys and their fathers have with a priest?” Ruth asked.

“Just matters concerning the factory that wouldn't interest you,” Abraham said.

“Enough!” Ruth glared and put her hands on her hips. “I hate when you keep brushing me off like a child. You're only two years older than me. According to our fathers, now that I'm thirteen, I'm even old enough to be your wife soon. So show me some respect and give me a real answer. What does a priest have to do with the factory strikes?”

Abraham ran his fingers through his wavy chestnut hair and looked at the door. Then he caught Jeremiah's eye. Silent words passed between them, and Jeremiah stepped forward to Ruth while Abraham moved towards the door.

“Look Ruth, we can't tell you what we're doing. But it's not that we don't want to tell you or we don't respect you; we just need to protect you. The less you know, the better. It's safer this way.” Jeremiah patted her arm.

“Safer? Why?” Ruth's tone changed as her anger evaporated, replaced now by fear. “Are you doing something dangerous?”

“Not intentionally, no. But there is a risk involved. That's all I can say. We'll tell you about it when we get back, ya?” Jeremiah leaned in and pecked her cheek. With a wave he moved towards the door where Abraham and Mark were speaking in low tones.

“Wait, Jeremiah!” Ruth called.

“What?” he asked.

“*Gay ga zinta hate*, be careful, promise me.”

He paused for a moment to look into her eyes. “I promise.” Then he smiled and winked. “See you later.”

He put on his hat, lightly touched the mezuzah and kissed his fingers, and then followed Abraham and Mark out the door.

As the door slammed Ruth muttered, “Lord, guide their footsteps toward peace. May You rescue them from the hand of every foe and ambush along the way.”

Taking a deep breath, she leaned over to pick up the fallen cards from the floor of their small parlor. Then she turned towards the kitchen to help Mama finish preparing supper.

Ruth awoke early the next morning to heavy banging on the front door. Still half-asleep she looked down at the tousled heads of her two younger sisters lying in the bed next to her. The shouts of angry voices outside drifted in the open windows.

“What's happening, Ruth?” her middle sister, Ester, asked.

“I don't know, Little Bird,” Ruth said. “Stay here with Gita. I'll go find out.”

She climbed from the bed and was greeted by the cold floor hitting her bare feet like icy pin pricks. Tiptoeing towards the front door she found her mother wrapped in her shawl huddled on the floor by the front window.

“What are you doing?” Ruth asked.

“Shh!” Mama hissed and gestured for Ruth to join her. “Don't let them see you.”

“Don't let who see us? And where are Da and Jeremiah? Are they still sleeping?” Ruth looked towards their bedrooms at the back of the house.

Mama grabbed Ruth's wrist and pulled her down to the floor beside her. “I need you to listen to me now, this is important. They are going to come in soon. And they are going to interrogate and hurt me. I need you to be brave, even if they try to hurt you and the girls,”

“I don't understand. Interrogate you? Why? Where are Da and Jeremiah? Didn't they come home?” Ruth tried to pull from Mama's grasp to stand.

Mama's grip tightened. “Da left for America, but we can't tell them that.”

Ruth stopped struggling. “What? Why? Did Jeremiah go too?”

A strained expression came over her mother's face. She reached out and smoothed Ruth's hair away from her face. As she was about to answer an axe came crashing through the front door.

“It's time to be brave.” Mama pushed Ruth towards the bedroom.

Ruth scrambled to her feet and raced to the bedroom. She looked back over her shoulder to see her mother calmly getting to her feet and dusting herself off. As the door gave way and the czar's soldiers invaded the house, her mother's lips moved in silent prayer.

Ruth found her sisters in the bed where she had left them, the covers up over their heads and their arms clutched around each other. She ducked under the covers to join them and held a finger up to her lips in a gesture of silence. Ester nodded and stroked Gita's young head, suddenly appearing older than her ten years. Ruth wrapped her arms around the two of them and they lay there entwined, tears falling down their faces wetting their shoulders and hair. Ruth heard the soldiers' voices raise in anger and then a slap across her mother's face followed by her muffled sob. Gita cried out and Ester clapped her hand over Gita's mouth, looking at Ruth with wide eyes. A moment later they heard heavy boots stomping towards them and the covers were ripped away.

Two stone-faced soldiers stood on either side of the bed. They grabbed the girls and dragged them from the bed.

“Ruth!” Gita screamed, reaching out her hands for her sister.

“Please, she's a child!” Ruth sobbed to the soldiers. “Please leave her be.”

They ignored her and dragged all of them out of the house. Ruth surveyed the chaos unfolding in the street. All around her burly soldiers were dragging families dressed in their bed clothes out into the cold to be interrogated. She didn't understand what was happening. Nothing like this had ever occurred in St. Petersburg before. Rumors had circulated about attacks on Jews in the countryside, but they'd always been safe in the city.

The soldier tossed Ruth and her sisters into the muddy sewage trench. Gita scrambled to huddle into Ruth's side, but one of the soldiers grabbed her and slapped her hard against the face.

“No moving!” he shouted against gritted teeth. Gita began to squirm and sob.

Ruth reached toward her sister. “Please, don't hurt her,” she begged.

In response the soldier turned and raised a fist. She dropped back to her knees in defeat.

“That's up to your mother. If she tells us what we want, we won't need to,” he sneered.

He threw Gita's small body back into the trench where she landed with a thud. She lay for a second before curling up in a fetal position. Then the soldier took his post standing guard next to her. Ruth squashed every instinct to reach out to Gita again. Instead she forced herself to look ahead to where her mother kneeled in the middle of a circle of four soldiers. Blood ran down Mama's face from a cut on her forehead. Her face remained impassive. Ruth was amazed by her mother's bravery and control.

One soldier stepped towards Mama in the middle of the circle.

“Where are they?” he yelled in Mama's face.

“I told you already, I don't know,” she replied calmly.

“I don't believe you!” he shouted.

He knocked her on the back of the head with the butt of his rifle and kicked her in the stomach.

“Try again. Where are they?”

Mama crumpled forward, coughing.

“I don't know,” she said between gritted teeth.

“This is pointless. Grab the girl.” He gestured towards Gita. “Maybe mother's protective instinct will make her talk.”

The soldier standing near the girls grabbed Gita by the arm and dragged her forward. A wet spot spread across her nightgown between her legs as Gita sobbed and squirmed in protest. Ester jumped up, but Ruth pulled her back.

“No!” Mama lurched forward. “Leave her. She doesn't know anything and neither do I. I already told you. They never returned home after.”

“But they were there yesterday?” the lead soldier asked.

A smile curved the edges of his lips.

“Yes,” Mama murmured.

“What was that? I can't hear you,” he mocked cupping his ear.

“Yes, they were there,” Mama's voice rang out louder.

She stared at the ground to avoid his gaze.

Ruth closed her eyes at Mama's words. This was about Abraham and Jeremiah and wherever they had gone yesterday. What trouble had they gotten themselves into? Da must have taken them away to America to protect them.

The soldier leaned down right into Mama's face so she had to look at him.

“And the meetings? They attended those too, didn't they?”

She turned away from him. His fist came crashing so hard against her face she went flying

backwards.

“Answer me!” he shouted.

A shriek pierced the air from down the street. Ruth looked toward the commotion and saw a man being pulled out of a house. His wife sobbed and tried to reach for him, but the soldiers held her back. They forced the man to his knees and one of the soldiers took out his pistol. The shot rang out and the man slumped forward.

Ruth looked back at her mother's horror-stricken face. The lead soldier grinned.

“Perhaps, now you see how serious we are, *drabke*. We're not going to find anyone hiding in your house somewhere, are we?”

Mama shook her head vigorously. “I told you, they were there, but they never came home. They must be among the dead.”

“And the meetings?”

“Yes, they attended them,” she croaked, “but if they're dead now, what does it matter?”

He stood staring at Mama for a long moment. She stared back the entire time, barely even blinking. Finally, he turned away to the other soldiers.

“Search the house again.”

The soldiers nodded and made their way back into the house. He remained outside, watching over the girls and Mama. Ruth tried to catch Mama's eye, but Mama avoided her gaze, instead looking straight ahead at the side of the house. The noise of shattering glass and plates drifted outside. Finally, the soldiers came back.

“Nothing,” one of them said.

The lead soldier nodded and turned back to Mama. “We're closing all roads and routes leaving St. Petersburg. You'd better hope they were among the dead, or rest assured they'll suffer and will be dead by the end of the day.”

He gestured to his soldiers and led them away from the house. Mama slumped over into the street. Ruth lurched forward to catch her.

“Ester, help me get Mama into the house.”

The two of them grabbed Mama's arms and dragged her to her feet. Looping her arms around their necks, she collapsed into them as they carried her into the house. Gita followed, whimpering. Crossing the threshold they were greeted by the sight of their belongings strewn across the floor. Ester stopped and gaped at the destruction. Moving past her, Ruth kicked glass from a picture frame out of the way and helped Mama to the bedroom.

As she settled Mama into the bed she called over her shoulder. “Ester, we'll clean up later. I need you to get some fresh water and rags to help Gita clean herself.”

Mama smiled weakly up at Ruth as she settled into her pillow. “You're a good girl, Ruth, I'm going to need you to take charge around here for awhile.”

Ruth sat on the side of the bed next to her.

“What happened, Mama?”

Mama sighed and closed her eyes. “Not now, I'm too tired to explain.”

“But where are they?” Ruth asked.

“I told you, Da left for America. He should already be far enough on his way, I hope.”

A chilling realization came to Ruth. Mama kept only mentioning Da.

“Jeremiah really is among the dead, isn't he?”

Mama nodded and tears pooled in her eyes.

Ruth swallowed and asked, “And Abraham?”

“Escaped with your da and his father.”

A sigh of relief escaped Ruth before she regained her senses and asked, “What about Mark?”

“With Jeremiah,” Mama said with another sigh. She turned on her side away from Ruth. Her

voice sounded choked when she spoke again. "Could you stoke up the fire to get me some hot water? I must wash."

Ruth got up and moved towards the door.

"Wait, Ruth," Mama called, "please keep the girls away and don't say anything about Jeremiah yet. I'll explain to them later. I just need some time alone first."

"Yes, Mama."

Ruth closed the door and stepped into the destroyed front room. Standing there where she and her brother had been teasing Abraham only twelve hours before, the meaning of Mama's words finally sank in. They were gone, never coming back. Jeremiah was dead. And if they made it to America it would be years before she'd see her father and Abraham again, if ever. How could so much have changed in only twelve hours? She leaned against the wall. The heat of the coming tears was just beginning to burn behind her eyes when she heard Ester's voice behind her.

"Where do you want the water, Ruth?"

She wiped her eyes and shook her head to pull herself together.

"Oh, um, let me stoke the fire and get it going again. Get some more for Mama and us too. Tell Gita to take off her gown."

As Ester scurried away to follow her orders, Ruth stepped into their bedroom and shut the door. She slid down the wall to the floor as the squelched sobs broke free. The fire could wait another minute.

Chapter Two

October 1905- St. Petersburg:

Evening was fast descending as Ruth rounded the corner from the marketplace and felt the impact of the woman's bony frame crashing into her.

“Watch where you're going!”

“Sorry, ma'am” Ruth mumbled. She scrambled to pick up her groceries.

Despite her quick reaction, the disheveled woman with the matted hair grabbed a rotting cabbage and stuck it under her torn, filthy cape before skittering away. Ruth sighed. So much for cabbage soup tonight, Ruth thought. The woman had run into her on purpose, but these were desperate times. Everyone had her tricks. Even the most alert and vigilant would inevitably get robbed at some point. That was life during a revolution.

The whole city had been on strike for two months. Each day the strike was spreading, so it felt more like the whole country was involved now. People on the street bragged they were going to bring the czar to his knees and force him to agree to democracy. The railway system had even joined the strike, forcing all transportation across the country to a standstill. Although the revolutionary efforts had begun nine months ago with Bloody Sunday, this was the first universal strike.

Ruth looked up at the darkening sky and quickened her steps. She nodded at a soldier standing on the street corner. Curfew would go into effect soon. A joke, since everyone knew most of the soldiers and police were no longer loyal to the czar, especially after the mutiny on that battleship in June. It got even worse last month when the czar ceded defeat in the war against the Japanese. The angry soldiers coming back picked fights in the streets, and even went as far as killing government officials on their front stoops.

Still, Ruth liked to follow curfew, if only for safety's sake. As Mama said, "at least during daylight you can see the violence coming and run. But after dark, you're dead before you can even see your attacker."

As Ruth cut through the alley to their block, she was startled anew to see the effects of the last nine months. The street where she had lived her whole life was almost unrecognizable. The stench surrounding her was overpowering from the garbage piles towering over the streets. No one had come to collect it in weeks. Once tidy little homes that had been meticulously maintained with potted plants out front were now in varying stages of disrepair. Roofs sagged, shutters were crooked, paint peeled--and that was just the houses still standing. Some lots now housed piles of ash where homes had previously stood. It was as if that Bloody Sunday last January had been a match igniting the fires of hell. Every day now felt like a gamble for survival.

She walked past the sagging remains of Abraham's house a few doors down from her own. That house had been her second home growing up. When Abraham and their fathers escaped to America, his family left as well. They were living with his aunt and uncle out in the country somewhere. Mama and Abraham's mother had clung to each other for what seemed like hours before finally saying goodbye.

Ester was waiting for Ruth outside, plopped on the front stoop with her legs outstretched in front of her. When she saw Ruth she clapped her hands in excitement. "You're home! Did you get bread?"

Ruth rolled her eyes. "The bakers haven't made any in months, remember?"

Ester pursed her lips in a pout. "Is it a crime to hope?"

"Nope, they're still clinging to those darn principles and saying not until the czar allows a national vote."

Ester pushed herself up to stand. "You don't need to bite my head off for asking. Why are you in such a bad mood?"

Not wanting to confess to the cabbage getting stolen, Ruth deflected the question. “Why are you sitting outside?”

Ester jerked a thumb towards the door. “Mama wanted me to get some fresh air before being locked in for the night. Gita's still sick and it stinks in there.”

“Still no improvement?” Ruth peeked in the door. “I thought she was coughing a little less last night.”

Ester shrugged. “You just slept through it. She's even spiked a fever now.”

Ruth's eyes widened. She pushed past Ester into the house.

“Mama!”

“Shush, Ruth!” Mama said, coming from the girls' bedroom. “I finally got her to sleep.”

“Gita's got a fever now?” Ruth dropped the groceries on the kitchen table. “Why haven't you called a doctor?”

Mama looked away and fumbled with the carrots on the table. “The money's gone, Ruth.”

“But it could be consumption!”

“You think I don't know that?” Mama threw the carrots down on the table. “There's nothing I can do. The doctor won't come.”

Ruth crept to the back room where Gita slept. Ester was right, it stank. The smell of sickness curdled in Ruth's nostrils. She swept past her mother to the hallway and slammed out of the house.

Desperation propelled her along and prevented her from feeling any fear as danger lurked. Mobs marched with torches through the streets to wreak their chosen damage for the night. The homeless and starving huddled together over small bonfires sharing bottles of vodka to ease their hunger. She scurried past them keeping her gaze to the ground to avoid eye contact. A flicker of fear crept up her spine. With their savings gone now and the mail stopped, could that soon be them? She shook her head as if to banish the terrifying thought and broke into a sprint. She would convince the

doctor to come and help Gita. She had to.

Aside from bringing money, the mail used to be her sole source of comfort in this turmoil. Da and Abraham had been gone for over a month when the first letter came last March. The return address was from an “Uncle Avi” in New York. Ruth walked into the kitchen to find Mama clutching the letter to her chest and sobbing on the floor. A day later Ruth received a letter from “Cousin David.” But true to the return address, the letter read formally as if it was from a distant relative and not her fiancé. Ruth was crushed. After so much time did Abraham really have no more to say or any emotions to share?

“You have to read between the lines, Ruth.” Mama smiled. “They know the letters are being read by the czar's people. But we know they made it and are well.”

At first Ruth didn't understand what Mama meant by reading between the lines. But after re-reading his letter dozens of times, she finally broke his code. His vague references to a tree in a park near their house and to a cow from a festival years ago were his way of recollecting shared memories from their childhood. His letter took on entirely new meaning then. It was suddenly warm and buoyed her up with strength from better times.

Mama cautioned her, though, about details she chose to include while writing back.

“You can't tell him about how bad things are here.”

“I know, because of the censorship.” Ruth nodded and dipped her pen in ink. “I'll find a way to put it in code.”

“No.” Mama said, stopping her hand. “We need them to believe all is well.”

Ruth stared at her mother in horror. “You want me to lie?”

Mama sighed. “I want you to protect them. They're over there. Powerless to change anything for us. Why make them worry?”

“So we suffer without telling them?”

Mama nodded and stroked Ruth's head. “That's the burden we must bear.”

So Ruth avoided any references to her life at all. It was easier than lying directly. Instead she filled her letters with references to better times, or asking follow up questions about details Abraham included about his new exciting life. Was learning English difficult? What was attending a movie like? If he noticed her lack of personal details he never commented. An intimate shorthand developed between them and Ruth relied on these letters to give her the push she needed to soldier on. Then the strike was declared in July and the letters stopped. Mama worried that without the newspapers reporting, Da and Abraham wouldn't know about the strike.

“They won't know their letters aren't reaching us. They'll think something happened to us and that's why we're not responding.”

Ruth tried to comfort her, “There's nothing we can do. We can't protect them from everything, Mama.”

Although Mama dropped the subject, Ruth heard her crying herself to sleep every night.

Ruth banged on the doctor's door, her fears about Da's worrying were just one more burden in her overflowing load.

The door opened just a crack.

“My sister is dying.” Ruth gasped. She gritted her teeth as her eyes filled with tears. “It's an emergency.”

“Do you have money?” asked a woman with graying hair pulled back in a severe bun.

The woman stared into Ruth's tearing eyes, waiting for an answer. Assessing there was none, she began to shut the door. As the door closed, Ruth's desperation turned to fury. She pushed past the woman into the house.

“No, didn't you hear me?” Ruth shouted. “It's an emergency. He has to help!”

“Everything is an emergency now,” the woman whispered cowering by the wall. “People are

dying all over the city.”

She gestured to her husband asleep in the rocking chair in front of the roaring fire.

“See? He's exhausted himself from trying to care for them all. He must pick and choose.”

A large pot of simmering stew in the hearth released fragrant whiffs of roasting meat. Ruth's mouth watered. She couldn't remember the last time they'd had meat.

“So he weeds out the people who can't pay while you benefit from our misfortune? You're monsters,” Ruth hissed.

The woman winced. “You don't understand.” She gestured again to the sleeping man. “He's worn himself to the bone and is sick now too. He won't last much longer.”

Ruth took a harder look at the man in the chair. His graying flesh gleamed with sweat. His cheeks were hollow, and the collar of his shirt was stained with blood splatters.

She shrugged and glanced around again at the comfortable surroundings. Anger and frustration still burned inside her. “Whatever lets you sleep at night.”

Ruth slammed the door as hard as she could. She'd failed. Gita was going to die, and there was nothing she could do about it. The threatening tears came rushing as she took off running down the darkened street.

Ruth gasped awake later that night to Mama lightly shaking her shoulder. The room was dark except for the candle by Gita's bedside. Night had fallen, but what day was it? They all blended now. She jumped to her feet to lay a hand on Gita's forehead. She'd been keeping vigil at Gita's bedside since that horrible woman turned her away. No payment, no service. Were their hearts made of stone? Mama defended the doctor saying he'd been all over the city fighting this horrid illness. If he was going to succumb to it himself, he needed to at least leave his widow provided for. Ruth couldn't understand how even in the pits of despair and grief, Mama was still capable of showing sympathy towards others.

Dark bags hung under Gita's feverish, wild eyes and her cheekbones looked like they were

about to pierce through her tight skin. Her breathing was labored and came out in whistling, raspy gasps. Ruth dipped a rag in the cool water by the bedside and wiped Gita's hot face.

“Not long now, is it?” she asked without meeting her mother's eye.

“Probably soon.” Mama put a hand on Ruth's shoulder.

Ruth dropped her face to rest on Mama's cool hand.

“What are you going to say to Da?”

Mama's voice sounded far away. “If we get the chance.”

Ruth looked up as she dipped the steaming rag back in the water and wrung it out. She tried to think of something to say that would ease her mother's pain, but could think of nothing.

Mama slumped into the chair by the bed and closed her eyes.

Gita made a choking sound and her breath stopped for a moment. They both stiffened. Then she sputtered and her breath came out in another wheeze.

“You should probably get Ester,” Mama whispered.

Tears slid down Ruth's face as she ran to Mama's room to wake Ester. By the time they returned, Mama was clutching Gita's hand as she choked for air. Ester bolted to the bedside and grabbed Gita's other hand as Ruth said a prayer. But the breathing never began again.

Gita was taken away in a cart the next day and was buried in one of the mass graves on the outskirts of the city. Mama jumped into motion immediately after, leaving them no time to cry or grieve. They stripped the sheets off the bed the girls shared and boiled them. They then scrubbed down the entire house. Mama forced them all to bathe in the hottest water they could stand, each emerging from the tub with a pinkish tint to their skin. Whenever Ruth or Ester began to complain or slow down, she'd clobber them and shout that she refused to lose another child.

They gathered all the items of value in the house into a pile in Mama's room. Once a week Mama would pick through the pile and choose something. She'd polish it until it gleamed, gritting her

teeth the entire time. Then she'd instruct Ruth not to return to the house until she'd sold it and had money in hand. Ruth wandered around the city from shop to shop for hours until she found someone who would not only agree to buy the item, but who would actually pull out cash and count it into Ruth's outstretched hand. This would usually hold them over to get a few small pieces of coal for the fire and groceries. But as the strike rolled into the third month, fewer and fewer shops pulled out the cash.

Trying to conserve coal and oil, they went to bed soon after nightfall. So they were already huddled together in Mama's bed for warmth when they heard the cheers in the street one night near the end of October.

They sprang out of bed and ran towards the window. People were hugging and laughing while others carried tables and chairs out from houses to the middle of the street. Two women walked around with trays of glasses while three men followed pouring from bottles of vodka. Mama grabbed her shawl and ran to the front door while the girls followed on her heels.

“What happened?” she asked the first person she saw.

“The czar issued a statement agreeing to convene a Parliament. He's giving us a voice!”

“Does that mean-” Mama breathed.

“The strike is over!” the old man from across the street clapped his hand on Mama's shoulder. “Still a long road to go. Knowing the czar, he'll change his mind again. But tonight, tonight we celebrate.”

Violin music began to play and was joined by a harmonica and some neighbors banging on a few overturned milk jugs. Dancers flocked to the area in front of the makeshift band.

The old man winked and held out his hand to Mama.

Ruth watched as Mama surveyed the happy scene in wonder. Then Mama shrugged off her shawl, handed it to Ruth and took his hand, twirling away into the crowd. Ruth and Ester watched as the deep worry lines on Mama's face seemed to disappear. Her laughter echoed in the cool night air as

she hiked up her skirts and danced as if for one night she had not a worry in the world.

Chapter Three

March 1909- New York City:

Four years later Ruth found herself peeking through the small parlor window to the bustling street below. The barks of street vendors in strangely accented Yiddish drifted through the open window. After reuniting with her father, they walked home from the dock while he pointed out the sights in the area. He described their apartment as “prime real estate” in the Lower East Side. It was located steps away from the Orchard Street marketplace, the largest marketplace for kosher goods in the city. It's a slice of home he'd said with a grin, surrounded by all these Jewish neighbors, many even from Russia. He excitedly told them how lucky they were to be living here. They all agreed and told him how nice the tiny three-room apartment was, despite its being half the size of their small house in Russia. And looking down at the throng of people on the street, the sidewalk was overtaken with rows of people five deep, Ruth felt as far away from home as possible. It was going to take some time to adjust to New York City and to having her family reunited again after four years.

“What are you looking at, Ruth?”

Ruth whirled to face Ester standing in the doorway.

“Just people watching. Everything is so overwhelming.”

“Ya, I know. I don't know if I've ever seen so many people in one place before. So Mama's wasting no time. She's already reorganizing the kitchen, claiming men have no idea how to set up a kitchen correctly. She wants me to start knocking on doors to look for sewing to take in. She says we need to jump right into our new lives,” Ester said scowling.

“Take in sewing? Why don't you just come around and look for factory work with me?” Ruth asked.

“Da won't let me. He says I'm too young and it's too dangerous.” Ester sat down on the couch with a thud. “Hey, are we going to share the couch or are you going to make me sleep on the floor?”

Ruth smirked. “Depends on where you put your smelly feet. One slip near my face and you're on the floor. And what do you mean he won't let you? You worked in the factories in Russia.”

“I know, that's what I said. But he said it's different here, you need to be at least fifteen to get on the machines. Besides he says that was only because he wasn't there.”

“So now that we're here with him he expects things to go back to the way they were before with his word as law?”

“Looks like,” Ester said with a shrug. “Just let it go for now, Ruth. It's too soon to start a big fight.”

Ruth shook her head. “I'm going to have to say something. We survived just fine without him for four years. He has to accept that we're not the helpless children he left behind.”

Ester ignored her and lay back on the couch, testing to see if her stretched out legs would fit.

“There's a lump.”

Realizing she was beaten for the moment, Ruth gave in and crossed the room to sit next to her sister. She scowled as she felt it for herself.

“Your side!” they yelled at the same time and laughed.

“Fine, we'll draw straws.” Ester said. “Or you could just take it because you're nicer?”

Ruth stood and put her hands on her hips. “Nice try, I'm also older.”

“Only by three years.” Ester crossed her arms in a pout. “I wish Gita was here.”

Ruth blinked in surprise. “Suffering and losing to a horrible illness wasn't enough for her, you want her to suffer the lumps on the couch too?”

Ester's pout softened. “I didn't mean it like that. I just meant I miss her. It's strange being the youngest now, and I can't believe we're here starting a new life without her.”

Ruth sat back down on the couch and wrapped an arm around her younger sister's shoulders and pulled her close.

“I know what you mean. I miss her too.”

Shrugging Ruth's arm from her shoulder, Ester jumped up and sniffled before grinning to break the somber moment.

“So what's it going to be like having Abraham sleeping right in the kitchen?”

Ruth looked away from Ester's expectant gaze and paused before answering.

“Honestly, I hadn't really thought about it yet. I've just been focused on seeing him again for the first time.”

Ester clapped her hands and ran over to where Ruth sat, “You must be so excited to see him. Just think, now things can finally be made official.”

Ruth smiled back and nodded. “It will be a welcome change from sharing letters. But I'm nervous too, Ester. I mean he's a man now. What if he no longer enjoys my company the way he used to?”

“What *narrishkeit!*” Ester smiled and patted Ruth's hand. If anything, he'll just find you even more interesting and enjoyable now.”

They were interrupted by the noise of a key turning in the lock.

“Guess it's time to find out,” Ruth said.

“*Mazel tov,*” Ester said with a wink.

Ruth cracked a small smile. She smoothed down her hair and stood. She wondered what Abraham would look like now. Was he feeling as apprehensive as she was? She took a deep breath and stepped into the kitchen. Ester followed close behind.

“Ruth!” Abraham jumped up from his cot. “You're all grown up...” He held both hands out to her.

He no longer wore a *kippah*, she noticed. He also wore American clothes, and had cut his hair. Her stomach swirled nervously, and as if by reflex she clutched the skirt of her rough, home-spun dress. Would he be bored by an old-fashioned, traditional girl from home when he'd become so comfortable in his new culture? What if he'd met someone here and been too embarrassed to tell her?

She crossed the room and cautiously took his offered hands. From over his shoulder she saw her mother and Ester ducking their heads to hide their smiles. When Abraham looked over his shoulder to see where Ruth was looking, they quickly turned away and pretended to busy themselves with putting plates on the shelves. He smirked and turned back to Ruth.

“Want to go for a walk?” he whispered.

She nodded and grabbed her coat from the coat rack. Stopping her, he took it and awkwardly held it out for her. She blushed and turned, allowing him to slide it on her. She buttoned up and saw Abraham holding the door open for her. The serious, polite man standing there was certainly a change from the card-playing cheater she'd known before. Was it just maturity or had the experience with Mark and Jeremiah changed him?

“So...” she said as they began their descent down the stairs to the street.

“So...” he said. “Four years, ya ?”

“Four years,” she laughed. “Tell me about your life here. I mean, I've read your letters. But tell me more. Tell me what you haven't written about.”

“What I haven't written about?” he said. “I've told you everything. I keep no secrets from you.”

“Oh, I didn't mean you kept secrets,” she said blushing. “I just meant I want to know about the little things. Where are your favorite places to go? What are your friends like?”

“Oh ya, I see what you mean now,” he nodded and chewed his lip. “This is strange, no? We used to know all of these things about each other.”

“Well, it's a fresh start.” She swallowed against the lump growing in her throat.

"I suppose it is," he trailed off.

He paused for a moment and then faced her.

"Do you want to see the factory where I work?"

She twirled a small piece of hair. "The Triangle right?"

"Ya, it's a shirtwaist factory," he said.

"What are shirtwaists?"

"It's a style of ladies' clothing. The girls here wear two separate parts instead of a full dress."

"Oh." She looked around at the ladies on the street surrounding her. Most wore hats and frilly white blouses tucked into different colored skirts that came down to their ankles.

She pointed to a trio of ladies ahead of them. "Are those shirtwaists?"

Abraham nodded. "Ya, and they're from our factory," he said. "I can tell from the pattern."

They fell into another awkward silence, walking side by side for awhile. Ruth fidgeted with the button on her coat sleeve while Abraham stared down at the street. Finally, she cleared her throat.

"Do you ever think of him?" she asked.

He stopped mid-stride and looked up at her. Two men rudely passed by them, one of them grazing Abraham's shoulder with his own. The jolt seemed to awaken Abraham from his reverie and he pulled her along to begin walking again.

He took a deep breath. "Jeremiah was my best friend, Ruth. Of course I think of him." A small smile escaped his lips. "Like when I see something really funny I know he'd love, I think how I can't wait to share it with him later. Then I'll remember I can't."

Pausing, he stared off for a moment before clearing his throat. "I think that's what I miss about him most. His laugh."

She smiled up at him. "He really did have a great laugh didn't he? It was so loud it sounded like it came from his toes." She looked at the crowd surrounding them. "I think I miss just talking to him.

He had a way of making any problem feel like it could be solved. Like it was you and him against the world. I never felt alone then.”

He reached for her hand. “He’s still with you, Ruth. You’re not alone.” He hesitated a moment. “You know back when my father and your father began negotiating our betrothal, Jeremiah and I had a conversation. He was as usual looking out for you.”

Tears clouded Ruth’s vision at Abraham’s words. She could easily picture Jeremiah confronting Abraham with puffed up bravado.

Abraham stepped out of the crowd pulling her under an empty storefront awning. He took both of her hands in his and looked down at her with a nervous smile.

“He asked me if I’d care for you as my own and you know I’ve always cared for you. Even as a child and early teen, to me you were the most fascinating person I’d ever known. Your wit, your stubborn nature, your persistence. No one would ever call you delicate.” He broke into a grin. “But that’s what we both always respected about you. And then he made me promise him I’d always protect you.”

He glanced down at the ground and shifted his weight from one foot to the other before continuing.

“Ruth, we may have lost Jeremiah that horrible day, but God seems to have spared me so I could keep that promise to him.” He paused and cracked a small smile. “So will you let me? Will you let me protect and care for you? Will you do me the honor of making this betrothal official?”

Ruth laughed through her tears. She felt relief from her silly fears about his meeting someone else and no longer wanting her. She also felt understood for the first time in four years. She silently cursed Czar Nicholas and his horrible soldiers for forcing them to be separated to grieve on their own for this person for whom they shared such a deep love. Although they both had changed significantly in the past four years apart, they did at least share this grief and painful understanding of the experience.

“Yes,” she gushed. “I’ll marry you, Abraham.”

He picked her up and twirled her around, affording some strange looks from passers-by on the street. He ignored them and put her down and reached up to cradle her face.

“I’ve dreamed of this moment the past four years.”

“As have I,” she said with a giggle. “I didn’t think you would have developed such a romantic streak as you matured.”

“Only with you, Ruth,” he whispered.

He straightened up and stroked his hand down her arm to find her hand again. He held their joined hands between them.

“We will still have to wait to have the wedding until my family arrives, if you don’t mind. I’m still pooling all of my money with our fathers to save for their passage.”

A nervous sigh escaped from Ruth before she could quash it.

“Oh, I’m that horrible, now?” Abraham asked raising an eyebrow.

“No, I didn’t mean,” she broke off when Abraham raised an eyebrow and laughed.

“I understand.” He stroked her hand with his thumb. “It might be for the best. We’ll have time to get to know each other again.”

She nodded. “Exactly. It just has been such a long time. As I was saying earlier, there’s still so many little things to discover again.”

He squeezed her hand and tucked her arm into his.

“And won’t it be fun discovering them? Why don’t we begin now?”

“The Triangle?” she smiled.

“The Triangle. I’ll even show you some of my other favorite stops along the way.” He winked.

“I’d like that.”

They stepped out from under the awning back into the heavy crowd moving along the street.

For the first time since her arrival that morning Ruth didn't feel overwhelmed. She felt lighter, hopeful, safe. She looked up at her new fiance's profile. He was a different, more mature version of the Abraham she'd known in Russia. But he was also still the same boy she'd climbed trees and laughed with. And she could tell she'd enjoy getting to know this new version as well.

Chapter Four

March 1909- New York City

Ruth's voice echoed in the stairwell as she turned back to look at Ester climbing the dark wooden stairs behind her. She waited on the third floor landing for Ester to join her. Someone opened one of the four apartment doors and peeked out. Ruth waved and offered a small smile. They pushed the door closed again. Ruth waited as Ester caught up with her on the landing.

“Everyone I asked told me the same thing over and over again.” Ruth said opening the front door to their apartment and untying her kerchief. “When it comes to factory work, the best pay is the Triangle. Although, you have to work on Saturdays and deal with some other frustrations.”

Ester followed close behind carrying the marketing basket. “Well, that can't be any worse than what you faced back in Russia.” She put the basket down on the kitchen table and walked over to the oven to warm her hands.

“I would think not. I mean the hours alone are significantly shorter. And if I'm looking for factory work, I should at least be paid properly for the years of experience I already have.”

Ruth hung her coat on the rack and moved over to where her mother was standing over the ironing board to peck her on the cheek. Mama shivered at Ruth's touch.

“Your nose is cold,” she laughed.

“Sorry, Mama. We got everything you asked for. Except the butcher said we just missed the soup bones.”

“The *fershtinkiner!* He said that yesterday as well and told me to send you back exactly when I did today.” Mama slammed down the heavy iron.

Ester laughed. “I think he has them all pre-sold already and just keeps telling you that to keep us coming back.”

Mama sighed and pushed a sweaty curl out of her face. The stains under her arms and the pile of freshly pressed clothing and linens beside her allowed the girls to guess the kind of mood she was in. Ester rushed forward and took the iron from her mother's hand.

“Here, let me finish that for you, Mama.”

Ruth pulled out a chair at the table and gestured for her mother to sit. Mama walked over and collapsed in the chair.

“I guess it'll take time to break into the inner circle here and establish ourselves as regular customers,” Mama said massaging her sore wrist. “It just continues to baffle me that the men managed to survive here for so long without laying any of this groundwork.”

Ruth snickered. “Really? You honestly picture Da knowing what to do with a soup bone?”

Ester snorted from the ironing board, and Mama chuckled herself.

“I suppose you're right. So what's this about the Triangle? You're hoping to get work there? You would already have a lead with Abraham there.”

Ruth reached into the basket on the table and grabbed a knife to start peeling potatoes.

“Ya. Everyone says it pays the best. I'd just have to work Saturdays.”

Mama pursed her lips and looked down into her lap.

“What?” Ruth asked.

“Nothing,” Mama leaned on the table to get up. “I'll wait and see what Abraham has to say to you about it when he gets home.”

The key turned in the lock a moment later.

“I guess I won't be waiting long,” Mama said.

Abraham came in stomping his feet and blowing on his hands.

“Ah, it's so nice and warm in here. Felt like my nose was about to break off out there.”

Ruth ran to the door to greet him.

“We had the oven stoked all day doing laundry and ironing.”

“Ah, you wonderful *berryers*, I'm liking laundry day,” he said, smiling.

“Can we talk a moment?”

“Sure, let me just hang my coat.”

He hung his hat and coat with a sniffle and then reached for her hand.

“*Vus machs da?*” he asked as they walked to the parlor for privacy. “Anything wrong my *bubbala?*”

“Oh no.” She smiled at him and squeezed his hand. “I just wanted to speak with you about a job. I was asking around the market today, and everyone said I should inquire at the Triangle.”

Abraham frowned and dropped her hand. “Your Da will not be happy with that idea.”

“Why, because of Saturdays?” she tilted her head up at him.

He nodded and combed a hand through his hair.

She stepped back away from him. “But you work Saturdays!”

“I'm not his daughter. And I have to provide for everyone.”

Ruth narrowed her eyes. “And my wages wouldn't be contributing to the household? I've been the one providing for my family in Russia ever since you all left.”

Abraham held up his hands in surrender. “I didn't say that. Look, you know how traditional your father is. You need to have this particular argument with him, not me.”

“Fine,” she turned on her heel and stormed back into the kitchen.

Ester and Mama pretended they were focused on their chores and averted their gazes as she walked in. She picked up another knife and began slicing potatoes for dinner.

Two hours later, Da murmured the last lines of grace, and they raised their bowed heads to dig in.

“I washed and pressed all of your shirts today,” Mama said, cutting into her *knish*.

“I saw. *A sheynem dank.*” Da took a sip of ale. His elbow bumped into Abraham's shoulder since they were so closely crammed around the small table.

Abraham tried to move his chair over to give Da more room, but with Ruth on his other side, there was none. She gave him a cold look and moved her plate over.

“Ya, *a sheynem dank*, Rachel,” Abraham's father, Samuel, broke in. “And also for dinner. It is nice to have a woman's touch around here again.”

Mama blushed. “It is my pleasure, Samuel. You and Jacob work so hard peddling your wares over the city all day. I only wish your dear Sarah could be here with me to spoil you all.”

“God willing, she will be soon. Along with my other *boychicks* and daughters.” Samuel kissed his fingers and offered them up to the air above.

“God willing,” Da echoed, wiping his mouth. “Is that *taiglech* I smell?”

“Ya, I made it Da,” Ester said with a small smile.

Da grinned. “My favorite. It is definitely nice to have our little *berryers* here again.”

Ruth scowled at her father's comment and pushed her plate away.

“And what's wrong with you two?” Da frowned. “You can't be fighting already.”

Samuel laughed. “Ya, at least wait until after the wedding before that *dreck.*”

Ruth looked up at the two of them laughing together. Mama gave her a warning look and mouthed, “Not now.”

Ruth shook her head at Mama and took a deep breath. “Da, I want to work at the Triangle Factory with Abraham.”

“What?” Da asked. He looked at Abraham. “You told her no, of course, ya?”

“I said she had to speak with you,” Abraham said, his voice low.

Mama nudged Ester, and the two jumped up and began clearing the dishes.

“I'm not his wife yet, Da,” Ruth jumped in. “And I am perfectly capable of choosing where I

would like to work. I chose my own factories back in Russia after all.”

Da looked down at his hands in his lap. “I regret that, Ruth. But things are different here. We're a family again, and that includes celebrating the Sabbath together each Saturday.”

Ruth crossed her arms and leaned forward onto the table. She focused her gaze on her father daring him to look at her. “There was no one to preside over the Sabbath in Russia. We didn't celebrate it there.”

Samuel stood from the table and walked to the coat rack to grab his coat. Silently, he opened the door and left.

Da accepted Ruth's challenge and locked gazes with her. He mimicked her and crossed his arms leaning forward onto the table as well. “Again, I regret that. But what is done is done. Here now in New York, we can break bread together.”

Ruth tried crossing her legs under the table and knocked her knee in the process. She glanced down for a second before returning her icy stare. “How much is rent?”

Both Abraham and Da sputtered out in shock.

“How dare you ask such a thing!” Da shouted.

“Ester go into our bedroom and close the door,” Mama barked.

Ester tried to catch Ruth's eye, but Ruth continued to stare down Da. Ester gave up when Mama snapped a dish rag at her and scurried into the other room. Mama then turned her attention to scrubbing dishes in the wash basin.

“Does Mama know?” Ruth persisted. “We knew in Russia. We had to because I was the one paying it. Both Ester and I were. And Mama took in sewing as well. So why shouldn't we know here? We'll still be contributing to it.”

Da looked at Abraham for help.

Abraham shrugged and finally chuckled. “Fifteen a month, Ruth. It's fifteen a month.”

Da glared at him. But Abraham stared straight ahead and pretended not to notice.

“Thank you, Abraham.” Ruth smiled. “So fifteen a month, plus household expenses, plus saving to bring the rest of Abraham and Samuel's family over.”

Da gave a small nod.

“Wouldn't it be best then, if I'll be working anyway, to work at the place that will pay me the most?”

Abraham looked over at Ruth and back at Jacob. He sighed. “It would be helping my family get over here sooner. And it's not like I'll be here for Sabbath dinners anyway.”

Ruth smiled and waved her hand at Abraham as he illustrated her point.

“And what of her safety?” Da grumbled.

“I'd be walking her to and from the factory each day. And handling all dealings with the foreman for her,” Abraham said.

“And for Ester,” Ruth piped in.

“No!” both Abraham and Da shouted.

Da slammed his fist down on the table. “Absolutely not and that is final. The law says school is mandatory until sixteen. We follow the law. Ester will go to school for two more years.”

“There are reasons they put this law into place to try to stop child labor in the factories. Please let this matter go, Ruth,” Abraham said taking her hand in his own.

“But you'll support me working in the factory?”

“Ya, if it's what you really want.” He squeezed her hand.

“And you, Da?” Ruth turned back to her father.

Da hesitated a moment before giving a small nod.

“Thank you!” Ruth jumped from her chair and ran over to her father wrapping her arms around him.

“You must walk with Abraham every day and let him handle all dealings for you, *fershtay?*”

Ruth nodded, smiling.

“And this is only until Abraham's family arrives,” Da continued. “After that you will be married immediately and you will respectably stay and manage affairs at home.”

Ruth nodded.

Da patted Ruth on the cheek before turning away and standing.

“Abraham, walk with me. I'd like to speak with you further.”

As Abraham stood to join her father, Ruth rushed over and grabbed his hands.

“Thank you for speaking on my behalf.”

Abraham cracked a half-smile.

“It wasn't easy. This is new for me as well, Ruth. But I'm trying.”

“And I appreciate it.” She grinned.

Her father stood at the door, waiting with his coat and hat already on.

Abraham joined him, and they both touched the mezuzah and kissed their fingers as they left.

Ruth stood staring at the door for a moment before turning to her mother.

“Well?”

“Well what?” Mama responded while drying a dish.

Ruth made her way towards the kitchen. “Aren't you proud of me?”

Mama grabbed the pot from the stove. “For what exactly?”

“For standing up for myself?”

“Oh, is that what that was?” Mama scratched at some caked food on the inside of the pot with her fingernail. “I thought it was waging an unnecessary battle.”

“Unnecessary? But I won! I got my way.”

“*Mazel Tav*. At what expense?” Mama scrubbed at the spot with her rag.

Ruth started putting away the dried dishes on the shelf. “What do you mean, at what expense? They both agreed without my having to give up anything.”

“Ah, that's not what I meant. I meant at what expense for them? Your father and Abraham are not your enemies, Ruth. You have a lot to learn about men before you marry.”

“But Abraham's fine with what happened. He said so.” Ruth picked up a dry dish rag and twirled it between her hands.

“Because he knows that's what you want to hear. But what about what he wants, or what he's worried about? They weren't fighting against you just to be mean. They've seen and experienced things you haven't, Ruth.” Mama handed the washed pot to Ruth to dry.

“As have I,” Ruth said, jutting out her chin.

Mama grabbed another dirty pot from the stove.

“True. But it's not a competition. Relationships are a give and take. We share our wisdom and experiences and protect our loved ones with it. We also try to understand our loved ones' reactions from those experiences.”

“Exactly, so Da should have been more understanding about what Ester and I experienced back in Russia learning to support ourselves.”

“But you're forgetting that Da didn't abandon you or leave you there on purpose. And he didn't get to celebrate the Sabbath for the past four years either, because he was alone and had no family to celebrate it with.” Mama stood from scrubbing the pot to face Ruth and waved a soapy hand in her face. “And now that we're finally here you're telling him you don't want to celebrate it with him.”

Ruth hesitated for a moment before putting the dry pot back on its hook.

“But what about you, Mama? You faced an interrogation from the czar's soldiers and barely batted an eye, and yet Da won't even tell you what the rent for this apartment is? Don't you deserve more?”

Mama leaned back over to finish scrubbing the pot. “I don't want more. I enjoy caring for my husband. I've missed caring for my husband. I want things to go back to the way they were because I know he feels enough guilt already.”

Ruth stood in silence playing with the towel in her hands.

Mama passed the finished pot over to Ruth to dry. “You're no longer playing a card game in the parlor with your childhood friend. If you keep pushing to get your way and treating Abraham as your rival, you will end up unhappy, Ruth.”

Mama dried her hands on her apron and walked over to the bedroom door. She opened it and stuck her head in.

“Ester? You can come out now, *bubbala*.”

“Did they eat my *taiglech*?” Ester asked, running to the stove top.

Mama came up behind her at the stove and stroked the top of her head. “No one really had an appetite for it tonight. But we can serve it tomorrow.”

Ester stuck a finger into the center. “It'll keep hopefully. Can I read in the other room or do you need me to finish cleaning?”

“No, I've got it,” Ruth said, taking the last of the dirty pots from the stove.

Mama patted her shoulder and walked with Ester into the parlor.

Chapter Five

April 1909- New York City:

Ruth had just survived her first day at the factory when a tall girl with dark brown hair and a mischievous smile burst into the dressing room behind her. Ruth was astonished to see that the girl was also wearing red lipstick and rouge on her cheeks. While Ruth was just concerned with gathering her belongings to meet Abraham and go home, the girl demonstrated the whirlwind that was her personality and introduced herself.

“Ruth! Here you are.” She grabbed Ruth by the arm. “Abraham said you were beginning today. I'm Chayele, my brother, Yankel is good friends with Abraham. Come, come *schmooze* with us and meet everyone.”

Despite Ruth's protests about needing to go home, Chayele dragged her over to a group of chattering girls in the corner of the dressing room by the windows.

“Meet Ruth, Abraham's betrothed.” Chayele squeezed Ruth's arm like an old friend. “That's Zusa, Mirele, and Filomena.”

Ruth gasped to see the olive-skinned, crucifix-wearing, Italian girl conversing so intimately with the rest of the Jewish girls. She'd never met an Italian face to face before.

“*Shalom*, Ruth.”

“Welcome.”

“Hello.” The girls all smiled and proceeded to fire a rapid-fire assault of questions at her.

“Where are you living?”

“How long ago did you arrive?”

“Are you excited to see Abraham?”

“Girls, girls, I don't think she speaks English yet.” Chayele interrupted the onslaught. “And give

her a chance to breathe,” she laughed.

The others soon joined her in laughter. Ruth clutched her coat and stared at the strange speaking girls, feeling overwhelmed. They were all dressed in the shirtwaist and skirt combos she had seen other women wearing on the street and wore their hair piled high on top their heads in a strange style that made their hair look like a waterfall of loose curls. She reached up and felt her own plaited braids and wondered how they could make their hair behave that way.

“She's really right off the boat isn't she?” Zusa asked in Yiddish.

Ruth nodded. “We arrived last week.”

Mirele noticed Ruth staring at their hair again. She pointed to her hair and said in Yiddish. “It's called the “Gibson Girl” style. It's the current fashion here. I could teach you how to do it.”

Zusa pointed to Ruth's hand-stitched one-piece dress. “And I could take you shopping after your first paycheck.”

“And I'll teach you English,” Filomena said.

Chayele patted Ruth's hand. “We'll make you one of our own. Tomorrow come sit by us on the machines.”

“But the foreman put me on the other end of the line,” Ruth protested.

Chayele winked. “Let me take care of that.”

“Ruth?” Abraham's voice called from outside the dressing room.

The girls giggled.

“Well, don't keep your man waiting now,” Chayele whispered. “It's already been four years.”

Ruth blushed and slid her coat on. “*A sheynem dank*, Chayele.”

“My pleasure, *bubbala*. Now *gay avek*,” she said making a shooining motion with her hands.

Ruth smiled and ran out to meet Abraham.

Chayele's forward familiarity grew on Ruth as the weeks passed. Ruth sat with the girls on the line and listened as they taught her tricks to make her work go faster. They worked in a team with each girl on the line appointed to a different job towards completing a shirtwaist. They had a quota of finished shirtwaists to meet each day. Ruth was given right sleeves. Chayele, in charge of left sleeves, showed her how angling the sleeve to the right made it zip through the machine faster, Mirele showed her to double pedal as it got to the end to tighten her stitch, and Filomena taught her a trick to reload her thread faster into the machine.

Through it all she tried to keep up as they gossiped about news from the neighborhood or girls from the factory. They spoke in a fast paced mixture of Yiddish and English they called "*Yinglish*" with Filomena occasionally contributing some flowery phrases in Italian to earn a laugh. Although Ruth was only able to keep up with a quarter of the conversation, it was still a welcome change from the silence demanded on the line in the Russian factories, and she found the days flying by.

At the end of their Saturday shift in her fourth week, the girls cornered her in the dressing room.

"It's time, Ruth," Chayele said, clapping her hands. "It's been a month. Let's get you looking like an American girl."

Ruth nervously patted her plaited braids. She'd been studying the "Gibson Girl" styles walking by her on the street, but she still didn't think she was ready to try pinning it up herself.

"Yankel already spoke with Abraham, and he agreed to accompany us shopping tomorrow," Chayele smiled.

"And I'll come over tomorrow evening to teach you how to pin up your hair," Mirele said placing a "Gibson Girl" picture cut from a magazine into Ruth's hand.

Filomena stepped forward and pressed a book into Ruth's other hand. "It's called a dime novel. Read with a dictionary. Fun to read and will help you learn English."

Ruth nodded as the swirling overwhelmed feeling engulfed her again.

Outside, Abraham was leaning on the wall of the building waiting for her. He smiled at the sight of her. Although he worked on the same floor as she did in the factory as a cutter, he was stationed at the big tables in the back of the room on the other end of the floor. So they didn't see much of each other during the day. And then at night they were always surrounded by their family. Their walks to and from the factory had become their only private time.

Ruth ran over to meet him. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Abraham shrugged. "It wasn't too long. Do you have your pay envelope? We can still make the bank."

He pushed himself off the wall, and they started walking.

"Oh yes, I just want to take out some money for the shopping trip tomorrow though." She handed him the book and picture to hold while she reached into her pocket. "How much do you think I'll need?"

"Ah yes, the shopping trip. I've been wanting to talk to you about that."

"Oh?" Ruth looked up and handed over her envelope to him. "But Chayele said you'd already approved it."

He nodded. "I did. And I have no problem with the shopping trip itself. You do need some new clothing. But my problem is the influence these girls are having on you."

He looked down at the book she'd given him to hold.

"Like this for instance," he held up the book. "Who gave you this?"

"Filomena," Ruth said grabbing it back. "She said it would help me learn English."

He scoffed, "Of course, the *shiksa*."

Ruth gasped. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He looked at her and slowed his pace for a moment. "Why do you even need to learn English?"

All we speak is Yiddish at home and around the neighborhood.”

“For communicating in the factory. You even speak English at the factory!” She glared at him. She then turned away and looked at the ground. “I only understand a quarter of what they're all saying.”

He took her hand and forced her to look up at him. “And you've only been here a month. You don't think you'll learn more as time goes on?”

Ruth shrugged. “I suppose. But Filomena said this book would speed up my learning. And she said it would be fun to read.”

Abraham snickered and picked up his pace walking again. “Oh, I'm sure it would be fun to read. But entirely inappropriate at the same time. None of those girls are betrothed, Ruth. And most of them do not even have family here with them. They're different from you.”

“Why should our betrothal have any bearing on who I befriend?”

They had arrived at the bank. Only men were allowed inside to deposit money, so Ruth was forced to wait outside on the stoop for Abraham to return before he could answer her question.

“I took out two dollars for your shopping tomorrow,” he said, sliding the folded money into his pocket when he came back out.

“You didn't answer my question,” she said.

He looked both ways before crossing the busy street, grabbing her hand to pull her when he saw a break. “Our betrothal itself doesn't have a bearing on your choice of friends. Nor am I going to tell you that you can't be friends with them. But I am going to caution you on socializing with them too much outside of work.”

“Why? I don't understand.”

He stopped and turned to her, causing a vendor pushing a cart to shout at him.

“They have different priorities, Ruth. Zusa and Mirele are here without families. They live

together in an apartment along with three other girls from the factory. Same with Chayele and her brother. They board with a family not far from us. They pay for rent and food, but other than that their money is theirs. They're not worrying about saving, so they can spend it on the latest clothing or books. They go out in groups together to socialize on their free nights and Chayele, I know, even goes on dates with multiple men.”

Ruth blinked at this information shocked by the freedom he described. His hands tightened on her shoulders.

“Do you see now why it is not fitting for a betrothed woman like you to socialize with them outside of work?”

She looked at him, sizing him up for a moment before cracking a wicked smile.

“So what's in the book that makes it so inappropriate?”

He tilted his head back and laughed before taking her hand to start walking again.

“Usually romantic stories that should make a good girl like you blush.”

“Oh.”

Ruth felt the tips of her ears growing pink as she pictured what he meant. She pulled her hand from his and instead tucked her arm into his as he slowed his pace to a more leisurely stroll.

“Maybe you could help me learn more English then. How did you do it?”

He tilted his head while he thought about it.

“We could try conversing only in English on our walks.”

She nodded.

“But, I have an even better idea. And it's almost as fun as your friend's book,” he said with a wink. “You'll have to wait until tonight though. It's a surprise.”

She grinned and squeezed his arm.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“Race you home?”

She nodded and followed as he took off weaving down the crowded sidewalk.

Darkness was just falling later that evening, and as Ruth and Abraham rounded the block, she noticed city workers up and down the street reaching up with long torches to light the street lamps. Entranced by the beauty of the dancing flames in the glass lamps, she stood watching them until Abraham nudged her with his elbow.

“See now this we can enjoy together. And practice English at the same time.” Abraham smiled.

Ruth looked at the sparkling fortress ahead of them. The brick-fronted theater was lit up by a large sign saying 5 cent shows, all the time. Posters of cowboys riding horses and men and women in romantic poses were affixed to the walls. A ticket counter with glass windows encased in gold carvings gave the building a special upper-class feel.

A man dressed in a striped suit and a straw hat with a ribbon stood in the sidewalk shouting.

“Tickets right here! 5 cents apiece.”

He stepped up to passers-by and motioned them towards the counter.

“Looking for tickets, folks? Step right up.”

Abraham squeezed her hand and navigated her through the crowd to the counter.

“Two to *The Cowboy Millionaire*, please,” he said in English.

As the ticket attendant handed him the tickets, Abraham turned to Ruth and smiled.

“Next time I'll make you ask for the tickets.”

She blushed and looked to the floor. She had yet to speak any English in public.

Music played as they walked inside to a dark crowded room filled with rows of wooden seats as far as the eye could see. In front there was a stage where a large white screen hung and pictures flashed across. Underneath the screen to the right was a man playing a piano. Abraham guided Ruth to two

seats together towards the middle. People grumbled and scowled as Abraham and Ruth stepped over them and shuffled past their feet to get to the seats. Once seated, they waited for the loop to finish and begin again at the beginning. Ruth sat back and leaned her head against the seat to watch her first movie.

The music was light-hearted and fun and appeared to match the emotions of the film. Across the bottom of the screen flashed English words that Abraham told her were meant to be narrating what was going on. He leaned over in the beginning to read them to her until the people sitting behind them hissed at him to be quiet. But even without him reading the words to her, she was surprised to find she could figure out what was happening.

She watched as a cowboy and a woman fell in love. But the cowboy lied to the woman, and she fled back to England where he followed her and won her back. By the end of the movie Ruth was wiping away tears. She looked over to find Abraham grinning at her.

“You liked it?”

She nodded.

“Good.”

As they made their way home Ruth thought about their conversation earlier and all she had seen in America so far. She looked up to find Abraham staring at her.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Just how wonderful everything is here.”

“Oh?” He tilted his head to her.

“Even with your complaints about the girls earlier, it still amazes me that they have the freedom to live as they do. To fend for themselves and choose how to spend their money, or how to spend their time on a Saturday night; that's unheard of in Russia.” She shook her head as she continued. “And even

us. We earn enough money that we can buy new clothes or go to the movies to learn English. We can even talk on the factory floor. It's wonderful. Everything's wonderful. I just love America!”

Abraham cleared his throat. “Not everything's wonderful, Ruth. And just because things appear to be perfect at first doesn't mean you won't eventually see flaws.”

She waved him off and continued to grin.

He opened his mouth to say something else and then shook his head changing his mind. They walked in silence for a few minutes before Abraham spoke again.

“I invited Ester to come shopping with us tomorrow. I figured she needed new clothes as well, and she hasn't really met many people since her arrival.”

“Oh, Abraham! Ya, she would enjoy coming tomorrow. I should have thought of that. A *sheynem dank* for looking out for my sister.”

“My pleasure. I enjoy being needed.” He smiled.

Ruth squeezed his hand and they continued on their walk towards home.

“Jeremiah would have loved it here, wouldn't he?” She stared up at the towering buildings surrounding them.

Abraham didn't answer, but Ruth, spotting a trio of street performers, ran over to watch and failed to notice.

Chapter Six

September 1909- New York City:

Ruth lifted her arms to air out her armpits where her blouse stuck to her skin with sweat. It was a warm Indian summer Monday, and between the heat the machines gave off and the temperature of the day it was sweltering in the factory. Only fifteen minutes into her shift she sighed, knowing it was going to be a long day. She stifled a yawn and grabbed another sleeve to stick into her machine. It had been impossible to sleep the night before. They were in that in between stage at night, no longer warm enough to sleep on the roof under the stars, yet the air in the apartment was muggy and stifling.

Her foreman came up behind her and clapped a dirty hand on her shoulder.

“You, I need help.” His breath smelled like onions and whiskey. “Come with me.”

Filomena and Mirele exchanged a look across the table from Ruth and Chayele caught her hand as Ruth got up to follow.

“Be careful, Ruth. Don't believe everything he says.”

Glaring at Ruth from down the line, he motioned for her to hurry. She nodded to Chayele even though she didn't understand the message and scurried to meet him.

He sniffled and wiped his nose on his hand. “A girl didn't show today on the finishing machine line. I'm putting you there.”

Ruth smiled. The finishing machines were a coveted position among the girls and would mean a promotion for her. She'd make two more dollars a week.

“Thank you, sir.”

He turned to look at her with red-rimmed glassy eyes. “Just don't screw it up. No pay for imperfect pieces.”

She nodded and slid into the empty seat. She looked to the girls on the line with a smile, but no

one raised her eyes to look at her. Before she could even ask for instructions he plopped down a pile of assembled shirtwaists held together by pins and was gone.

She leaned towards the girl next to her. "A lot of work, ya?"

The girl did not respond.

Ruth repeated her statement in English, but the girl still did not respond.

Sighing, Ruth picked up a shirtwaist removed the pins attaching the first sleeve to the base and fed it through the machine. She looked over to her old seat. Filomena cracked a joke, and the others threw their heads back in laughter. Her work day would be lonelier, but two dollars more a week would bring Abraham's family over to America sooner.

Ruth sauntered out the front door at the end of the day.

"Did you hear my big news?"

"What big news?" Abraham asked, pushing off the building wall to join her.

"I'm a finisher now!" Ruth grinned.

"You let them move you?"

"Of course, it's a two dollar raise." She raised her eyebrow. "I thought you'd be happy."

He shook his head. "Did he actually say you'd get the two dollar raise?"

Ruth thought back to her exchange with the foreman. He just told her to take the machine. In fact, the only mention of pay he made was to tell her she wouldn't be paid if she made a mistake.

"Well, no," she grumbled, "Everyone knows the finishers get ten a week."

Abraham snickered. "Nothing should be assumed at the Triangle, Ruth."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She frowned. "You don't think the factory thinks my work is good enough for a raise?"

Abraham took her hand in his and pulled her along to walk with him.

“Calm down. I didn't say that. I have nothing but faith in you. I just don't have as much faith in the factory. I hope beyond hope they give you the assumed raise for your work. I wouldn't count on it though.”

He patted her hand to soften his words, and Ruth chewed on her lower lip. They walked the rest of the way in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

Later that evening, Ruth and Ester walked the steaming dinner dishes to the table where the men sat waiting.

Da looked down at his plate and slammed his fist on the table. “Where did this come from? We can't afford good slices of meat like this.”

Ester and Ruth exchanged a strained look. They had tried to talk some reason into Mama. But in her excitement about the promotion and them all settling into their new lives here, Mama had gone a bit overboard in celebrating. She'd sent Ester out to the market with instructions to get the best slices of beef offered. She'd then set the table with the good tablecloth, plates and candlesticks.

“We're celebrating tonight, Jacob.” Mama put her hands on his shoulders and smiled. “We've been here six months and Ruth got a promotion today. We need to celebrate the joy in our lives for once.”

Da scowled, looking down at the six plates of meat. He opened his mouth to respond when Samuel clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“You're right, Rachel. And this *Alter cocker* here realizes it as well. His stubborn nature just temporarily blinded him.” He squeezed Da's shoulder making Da wince. “We should have had a celebration when you ladies arrived. But we'll make up for it now, ya?”

Da chuckled and shook his head. “Ya, Samuel. Thank you for pointing out my shortcomings. But if you're going to make this a real celebration, Abraham needs to grab the kosher wine from the

cabinet.”

The women breathed a sigh of relief while Abraham jumped up and got the wine from the kitchen. He poured glasses and Da lifted his in a toast. “*L'Chayim.*”

They clinked glasses and took a sip and then Mama said, “And to family. My heart finally feels like it's beating again being with you all again.”

Samuel leapt from his seat and scrambled over to his bed where he pulled out his violin case from underneath.

“Let's make this a real celebration!” He took out the violin and began to play. His face took on a peaceful expression. “It's been far too long since I've played for joyful reasons.”

He tightened the strings, and soon a foot tapping melody was enveloping them all. Da got to his feet and held out his hand for Mama to join him. She smiled and put down her napkin and he pulled her up into his arms. Moments later their steps naturally in sync, as if fully at home with each other, he had her twirling around the room and her eyes sparkled. As Ruth watched them it brought her back to that night years ago when she'd stood in front of their house in St. Petersburg watching Mama dance on the streets. Sadly, that had not gone according to plan; the czar had gone back on his word within six months. She hoped tonight's joy would last.

As the dancing again brought laughter and wiped away the years of worry and stress from Mama's face, Ruth marveled at how young her mother looked. It suddenly dawned on Ruth that she was already born by the time Mama was Ruth's age. Mama was fourteen when she married Da. Then Jeremiah was born a year later. And Ruth two after that. Ya, Mama was seventeen when she had Ruth, the same age Ruth was now. No wonder Mama was so lost when Da left. Life with him was all she really knew. Ruth exhaled a deep breath startled at the thought.

She jumped as Abraham's voice interrupted her musings. “Care to dance, *bubbala?*”

“Of course.” She smiled.

Abraham's hand tightened on hers as he helped her to her feet. He wrapped his arm around her waist and they each took a tentative step. His foot came down hard on her big toe.

“I guess they have a few years on us to make it look that natural, huh?” He said with a laugh.

She looked at her parents who appeared to be lost in their own world. They seemed to be able to anticipate the others' next movement before they even made it. She rubbed her toe for a moment and looked up at him again. He tilted his head, questioning if she wanted to try again. She took his hand, and they took another hesitant step together. This time they moved without disaster. Slowly, they made their way around the room listening and feeling for the slight changes in breathing and movement the other made. Their movements began to blend together and although they still needed to concentrate, it began to feel natural, and Ruth tilted her head back and laughed.

Was this what she was meant to have ahead of her? A blending of movements as they came together to become one?

The rest of the week passed by, and Ruth sighed as she finished the stitches on her last blouse of the day. She turned to stretch her back in the chair as Chayele had taught her. It was pay day. Soon all of the tension from the past week would be worth it. She allowed herself a quick glance over to where Chayele, Mirele, Filomena and Zusa sat. As usual it appeared they were enjoying themselves. Since she'd moved lines, she had barely seen them. They exchanged a few words in the dressing room while passing. As the week had gone on though, she came to feel they viewed her move as a betrayal of sorts. But she was no backstabber; she hadn't tried to bypass them. It wasn't as if she had asked for the foreman to move her. She had been as surprised as they. If anything, she felt betrayed by their reactions. She thought their friendship was stronger than the line. Hurt by their laughter, she frowned and looked away to distract herself from her loneliness.

Her gaze settled in the back of the room in the kindergarten corner where the youngest girls in

the factory worked trimming all of the extraneous threads. She questioned the factory's adherence to the child labor law at times, but it was said that none of the girls were younger than fourteen. And since most of the young girls were new immigrants to the country she guessed that was difficult to verify. Truthfully, she didn't see what all the fuss about the age requirement really was anyway. Ester and she had both worked back in Russia and been younger than fourteen. She didn't feel they suffered that much for it. It was definitely a controversial topic here in America though, with labor unions, politicians and other outspoken reformers speaking out and trying to pass more restrictions. So far their biggest accomplishment was passing the compulsory school laws. She did find it intriguing. To be able to stay in school longer and feel really comfortable reading and writing. She'd first thought it was unnecessary for Ester to attend school here in America. But as Ruth watched Ester now far surpassing Ruth in her fluency in the English language, Ruth couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

The foreman strode over to the kindergarten corner to hand out pay envelopes. He was balding, short and stubby, and the buttons of his vest stretched over his bulging stomach. His shirtsleeves were rolled up around his elbows and his shirt was stained around the armpits. He stopped and leaned over one of the girls and pushed a piece of hair behind her ear with one greasy finger. The girl's face flushed from blinking back tears. The girls surrounding her had their heads bowed down, focused on their trimming, ignoring him. Ruth's stomach heaved as she looked away. Had anyone else seen this? The steady drum of machines continued speckled with chatter and laughter. It seemed his inappropriate gesture had gone unnoticed.

He continued his distribution and made his way closer to Ruth's line of machines. The girls surrounding Ruth all began packing up their work for the day. Ruth's heart pounded in her chest as he grew closer to her station.

“Thank you, sir,” the girls all said with bowed heads. He grunted in response.

Ruth counted the remaining envelopes in the diminishing pile as he moved closer. Why were

there only four? There were still five girls including her remaining. She hadn't been paying close attention to the other girls' work, but they were all experienced finishers on the line. She didn't think any of their work would have been shoddy enough to not get paid. So what did that mean for her then? She'd been slow, but that was because she'd been meticulously going over each garment.

“You.” He said breaking into her thoughts. “No pay for training.”

He moved on to the girl on the other side of Ruth.

“Training?” She grabbed his arm. “You never said this was training. And what about my usual pay?”

He shrugged “You didn't perform your usual job. Training is no pay and no completion of your usual job equals no pay.”

Ruth sat there in shock unsure of how to respond. Two girls to her right exchanged looks and shook their heads whispering.

“He's done this before hasn't he?” Ruth asked.

They stood up, the noise of their scraping chairs on the floor drowning out their whispered voices.

“Hasn't he?” Ruth shouted.

One girl turned back to her. “It's a game he plays. When he needs extra hands, he pulls someone up temporarily. You're just one of the many fools who have fallen for it.”

Ruth blinked back tears. “Why didn't you tell me?”

The girl shrugged and turned her attention back to her friend as they moved towards the dressing room.

With all the pay envelopes now distributed, the floor erupted with noise. Chairs scraped back, and a steady stream of girls took off towards the dressing room and staircase chattering about plans for their free day.

“We tried to warn you.”

Ruth looked up to find Chayele and Filomena standing in front of her.

“You just told me not to believe all his promises. You didn't explain why.”

“I didn't realize I had to be more specific than that.” Chayele pursed her lips. “Come on, you can't sit there moping. So they pulled one over on you. You'll come back Monday to your old position and be the wiser for next time.”

They all stood there silently while she gathered her belongings. She took some time to stop to sniffle and wipe her eyes a few times, and they ended up being the last ones to leave. The girls were patient and did not complain though. Instead Filomena squeezed her hand while the guards checked their bags at the door, and Zusa patted her on the back as they walked down the stairs. They emerged on the street, and Ruth spotted Abraham in his usual spot leaning against the wall of the building. He was deep in conversation with Yankel and had his back to the girls. Ruth crossed her arms and leaned on the wall to patiently wait, but Chayele pushed in between the boys.

“Your girl got snookered.” She gestured to Ruth.

Abraham whirled around to face Ruth. He flexed his hands into fists by his sides. Chayele nodded to the rest of the group, and they all slipped away, leaving them alone.

Ruth blinked back tears and tilted her head to look up at him. But instead of stepping towards her as she expected, he stayed where he was and looked away to avoid meeting her eye.

“I know you warned me.” She shook with emotion and gestured with her hand. “That's what you want to say isn't it? That you told me so?”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and sighed. “I was afraid this was going to happen. That's why we all warned you. The factory is known for doing this.”

“And you all just accept this?” She balled up her hands into fists on his chest. “All of you? You

warned me. That makes it acceptable? Why does the factory get away with doing this?"

He shrugged. "Because they can. They're the best factory in the city. They're never seeking out employees, Ruth."

"Still that doesn't give them the right to completely take advantage of us." She whirled around and grabbed the door. "I'm not giving in yet. I can't imagine going home to face Mama without at least telling her I spoke up for myself."

She took the stairs two at a time to put distance between them before he could stop her. It was dark as she reached the ninth floor landing except for a lone light shining in the office at the back of the floor. She began to cross the dark room when she heard the faint sounds of a scuffle and a muffled scream coming from the office. Stopping in her tracks, she wondered if she should wait for Abraham. Then she heard a shriek followed by a sobbing voice begging for help. Abandoning her hesitation, she sprinted across the factory floor. She got to the office door and saw the small girl from the kindergarten corner being held down on the floor by the foreman. Her cheek had a bloody gash, and her blouse was torn. She struggled to keep her skirt down against the foreman's groping hand.

"What are you doing?" Ruth demanded.

The foreman froze looking up at Ruth in panic. Taking advantage of his distraction the girl jumped to her feet and ran out the office door. Abraham's feet pounded on the empty factory floor as he ran up behind Ruth. Assessing the situation, he grabbed her arm and dragged her away without a word. She paused in the stairwell as understanding settled upon her.

"No, we can't stop here. It's not safe." He dragged her on.

They emerged on the street where streetlights were being lit as dusk descended. He led her across the street and ducked into a quiet side street before finally stopping and leaning her against a building. She stood there in shock for a moment before looking up at him.

"Was he...?" She sobbed, unable to continue.

He nodded and looked away unable to meet her eyes.

“You knew!” She hit him in the chest.

“I suspected.” He caught her hand and clasped it between his. “There were rumors.”

“That's why you and Da wouldn't let Ester work at the factory. Forcing her to finish school first instead.”

He nodded. “I'm sorry, Ruth. We wanted to protect you.”

“By keeping the truth from me?” Her voice rose an octave.

“I told you it wasn't all perfect.” He shrugged helplessly.

She tore her gaze away from him and looked at the city surrounding them. A few dirty boys scampered along the busy street intersecting theirs. She watched as one of them stopped and slipped the wallet from a distracted man's pocket while he inquired about a shoe shining. Suddenly, she noticed the mud and sewage in the gutter ahead of her and the smell of rotting food which had been sitting out in the sun all day at the market behind her.

“I've really been blind, haven't I?” she asked.

He squeezed her hand. “You escaped a revolution. And it's different here. The corruption's more concealed.”

Her breath tightened in her chest, making it difficult to breathe. As she gasped for air, tears erupted, and Abraham wrapped his arms around her. She pressed her face into his shoulder and let him hold her as the tears kept coming.

Chapter Seven

November 1909- New York City:

The machines were deafening as they whirled with frantic energy. The holidays loomed closer and orders poured in. The factory workers were expected to stay late into the night and come in earlier each day to complete the extra orders. During the first week of overtime, Ruth asked Chayele if they were given any extra pay for the extra hours. Chayele snickered in response.

Occasionally, the owners or foremen walked through the factory, distributing small meat pies to the workers. Each time this occurred, they forced the workers to gush about the generosity of the gesture. Ruth flushed with anger each time they came through and one particularly long day sent her over the edge.

The foreman took a small meat pie from the container to give to Ruth.

She looked away from him and turned back to her work.

He sputtered, his cheeks turning bright red. “You ungrateful *chaya*, what you think you're too good to accept the owners' generosity?”

“I'm not hungry,” she shrugged and stared him down. He moved away.

“What's with you?” Filomena took a big bite out of her pie. “I mean they're not great, but they're not worth making a fuss over.”

Ruth slammed down the scissors she was using. “It's insulting. They keep us all these extra hours without pay, and we're supposed to gush about a meat pie?”

She shook her head and picked up another blouse with a trembling hand. “It's just not right.”

Chayele took the blouse from Ruth. “Don't work when you're angry. You'll just make a mistake, and they'll dock your pay.”

“No one is saying the pies make up for the unfairness of the situation.” Zusa wiped her hands on

her skirt. “But starving yourself isn't hurting anyone but you.”

Ruth shrugged and pumped her foot to power up her machine again. “I guess the stress is just getting to me.”

“Oh trust me, we feel it too!” Mirele cracked her knuckles. “I've lost at least three dollars in the last three weeks, courtesy of Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris.”

Zusa chuckled. “Three? I'm up to four. I had to turn down another load last night.”

Ruth stopped her machine and stared at the girls. “What do you mean you're losing money?”

Chayele patted Ruth's hand. “They both take in extra work in the evenings to help cover their expenses. As do many of the girls in the factory without families.”

“And by being forced to stay the extra hours you can't complete your work at home.” Ruth shook her head.

Mirele flashed Ruth a smile. “We'll survive, *bubbala*. We always do.”

They fell into silence for the next few hours. The drone of the machines was interspersed only by the crack of a knuckle or neck. Ruth's eyelids grew heavier and harder to keep open as the evening wore on. Thankfully, it was Saturday, and they would get a break tomorrow. As the last hour wound down, Ruth was startled out of her grogginess by shouts from the cutting tables at the back of the room.

“You lying *gonif*!”

One of the cutters leapt over the table and lunged at the foreman. The other cutters grabbed for his arms and pulled him back.

“Pull yourself together! Mistakes always equal less pay. This is not news.”

“You lie! There were no mistakes!” The cutter lunged again waving his pay envelope. “This *dreck* barely covers what you owe me, let alone all my men as well.”

Ruth recognized the man as one of the more respected contractors, a man who'd been working in the factory for years. The contractors were holdouts from the original apartment sweatshop days that

had teams of men working under them still allowing the contractor to negotiate on their behalf. She looked around and saw that all work had ceased and everyone was staring at the disturbance unfolding, waiting to see what would happen next.

The foreman gestured to security. Two large guards grabbed the contractor and dragged him towards the door.

The foreman turned back to the rest of the floor and waved his arms, “What are you waiting for? Get back to work!”

The contractor's feet squeaked on the floor as he struggled against the security guards.

He turned and yelled over his shoulder. “Are you all going to sit there and witness this injustice? We all know they're crooks. Stop letting them get away with it!”

Ruth balled her fists in her lap, but she was unsure of what to do. Across the room she saw Abraham step away from his table towards the fray. His shoulders were tense, and he looked as if he was holding his breath. The floor sat in silence listening to the foreman's shouts and the contractor's competing desperate pleas. Around her, girls exchanged looks, and then the sound of scraping chairs pierced the tense air.

“Enough!” one girl shouted.

“Stop the injustice!” said another.

One by one girls stood up across the factory floor. Two cutters swept all of the fabric on their table off to the floor by the foreman's feet and followed the struggling contractor to the door. The other standing girls followed.

“If you leave, you will be fired!” The foreman climbed to a tabletop and stomped his foot to get attention. “If you walk out that door, there's no coming back, I'm warning you.”

His cracking voice was soon overpowered by a chant reverberating off the factory walls.

“Now's the time. Stop the injustice!”

Workers pushed past the table where he was standing and flowed to the staircase door.

Ruth looked back across the room towards where Abraham had been standing. She tried to catch his eye, but he scowled and turned away. She stood, trying to see where he'd gone. In the process she caught the eye of another girl at the table across from her. The girl looked terrified. Her knuckles were white as she clutched the table in front of her. She broke the connection with Ruth and turned to the rest of the girls at her table. They began to whisper and all crossed their arms and pursed their lips as if condemning the commotion.

Chayele jumped to her feet, overturning her chair in the process.

“Now's your chance, Ruth.” She grabbed Ruth's arm and pulled Ruth away from the table.

“Enough talk, time for action.”

Chayele kept hold of Ruth's right arm, and Zusa took hold of her left. Ruth looked over her shoulder and saw Filomena and Mirele behind them. She turned back to Chayele, and together they all walked down the narrow aisle between the machines and joined the chanting crowd making their way down the staircase. She kept turning and looking over her shoulder to find Abraham, but she couldn't spot him in the crowd. Meanwhile, the crowd kept pushing her forward and their chants grew even louder. Pouring out into the street they moved as one large mob down towards their union headquarters. Ruth floated along amongst them, chanting so loud her voice cracked until she reached the turn-off for her street.

“I need to go home and meet Abraham or I know he'll worry,” she shouted to Chayele.

Chayele nodded and squeezed her hand before moving on with the others.

As Ruth climbed the dark staircase to the apartment, she felt the adrenaline rush beginning to wear off. By the time she opened the front door, butterflies were flapping in her stomach. She needed to make them understand.

“What do you mean you walked out?” Da roared. “What were you thinking?”

“And where's Abraham?” Mama asked.

They stood in the kitchen on either side of the table where Ruth sat. Ester and Samuel hovered by the living room door afraid to participate, but hanging on every word.

Ruth waved Mama off. “We got separated in the commotion. I walked home with the girls.”

She turned back to where Da was pacing. “You'd understand if you were there. Everyone just came together.”

They looked up as Abraham opened the front door and walked in interrupting one of Da's laps. Before he could slide his coat off, Da turned on him.

“And what about you? Did you join in this *fercokt* uprising as well?”

Abraham calmly took off his coat and hung it on the rack.

“No, I stayed and completed my shift.”

Da smirked. He turned to Ruth. “At least your boy has some sense.”

Ruth ignored Da and stood from her chair.

Grabbing Abraham by the arm she locked gazes with him. “You stayed to finish your shift?”

Mama crept up behind Da and took his hand. She pulled him towards the bedroom. He yanked his hand away from her and shook his head. Mama scowled before going into the bedroom by herself.

Abraham swallowed hard. “I've been on the front lines of an uprising before, Ruth. I've seen the cost of such actions. I don't expect you to understand.”

“Understand?” Ruth turned her back on him and raked her hand through her hair. “You saw that little girl get attacked by that foreman. She was no older than Ester! You saw that man get cheated today. You saw me get cheated!”

He reached for her as her voice grew more shrill, but she waved him off.

“No, Abraham. I do not understand. How can you sit there and condone these horrible

occurrences when everyone around you is speaking out against them? Are you that much of a coward?"

Da slammed his fist on the kitchen table. "Don't you ever call him that!"

Abraham turned to Da and sighed. "She wasn't there, Jacob. Leave her be."

Da frowned at Ruth over the table before turning away and slamming into his bedroom.

Ruth and Abraham were left standing in awkward silence in the kitchen. She heard Samuel's voice faintly from the parlor where he'd begun reading to Ester. Abraham rubbed his finger over the top of the kitchen chair avoiding her eyes.

Ruth cleared her throat. "Is this about Bloody Sunday?"

His head shot up.

She took a small step towards him. "Help me understand, Abraham. Tell me what happened."

He leaned forward on the chair as if he needed it to support himself.

"The images are forever burned in my brain." His breath hissed out between his gritted teeth. "Not a day goes by when I don't wish we stayed home playing cards with you instead of going on that march."

"But you were trying to get your demands heard to end the strike, ya?" She put a hand on his back.

He let out a sigh and started speaking quickly. "It was Mark's idea to organize a peaceful march and present our demands to the czar. He and two of his friends decided to include Father Gapon and allow him to spread the word to other supporters. They all swore there would be no violence. And there wasn't on their part." He trailed off.

"We heard the soldiers opened fire on the crowd." Ruth prodded him on.

Abraham nodded.

His voice sounded choked as he responded. "Ya. They were first aiming for Father Gapon, I think. Mark was standing next to him and went down first. But they kept firing! The bullets just kept

coming.” He shook his head and inhaled deeply before continuing. “Jeremiah was standing next to Mark as he went down. He was just trying to help him. I first thought the bullet only hit him in the shoulder. But the blood came gushing. He fell right by my feet.”

His shoulders began shaking.

She rested her head on his shoulder and stroked his arm. “Sh. There was nothing you could do.”

They stood there for a few minutes while he cried softly. Finally, he sniffled and stepped away from her, wiping his eyes.

“I just can't do it again, Ruth. We stood up against injustice then too and for what? What did we gain from it? I got to watch my brother and best friend die at my feet and the injustice continue.”

Ruth was about to respond when a knock at the door interrupted. She held up a finger to him and went to answer.

Chayele and Yankel stood in the hallway shivering.

“What are you two doing out this late?” Ruth motioned them in.

Yankel shook his head as they shuffled in. “Leave it to my sister to immediately charge ahead. I'm just following around to chaperone.”

Chayele hit him lightly on the chest. “What my dear brother means is, this is too important to wait. We're spreading the word that in light of what occurred today, the Garment Workers' Union has called an emergency meeting tomorrow at eleven.”

Ruth nodded. “We'll be there.”

Chayele smiled and squeezed Ruth's hand. “Isn't this better than refusing the meat pies?”

Ruth laughed and showed them back out. She closed the door and took a deep breath before turning back to face Abraham.

He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at her. “We'll be there? I didn't realize I'd agreed to join the cause.”

She rushed towards him and stopped when he held up a hand to her.

“But Abraham, don't you see this is your way to make it all worth something? We could finish the fight you all began together. It might not be Russia, but it's still the same enemy. The factories are exploiting us here, just as they were there. Don't let Jeremiah and Mark's deaths be for nothing.”

He shook his head. “It's not that simple, Ruth. People like Max Blanck and Isaac Harris are not just going to roll over and give in.”

She ignored his deflective stance and put her hand on his arm.

“Then we fight. Mark and Jeremiah did. And they wouldn't want you backing down now because they lost that day. There are many battles to win the war, right?”

He looked away and said softly, “And just how much blood needs to be spilled in the interim?”

The next morning Ruth dragged Abraham begrudgingly to the meeting. As Abraham and Ruth opened the door to the union hall, a wave of heat crashed over them. A crowd of people stood shoulder to shoulder across the back of the room. Rows of chairs facing a makeshift stage up front were filled with chattering girls twisting and turning to face each other.

“Ruth! Abraham! Over here!” Chayele waved from the other side of the hall.

Ruth took Abraham's hand and began to push through the crowd over to where the girls stood. He pulled back and motioned towards the back wall by the door. She shook her head. He shrugged and let go of her hand.

She sighed. “You're really going to stay here?”

“I want to stay by the door.”

“Fine, be anti-social then.” She waved him away. “I'm joining the group.”

Chayele immediately enveloped Ruth into their circle. They greeted her with sparkling eyes and warm hugs. Ruth, caught up in their giddy excitement, forgot about Abraham for a moment. When she

did take a breath and glance over her shoulder, she found him scowling at her from across the room. She sighed and turned away, refusing to allow his sour mood to dampen her spirit.

“Where did all these people come from?” Ruth asked.

“We spread out and herded people from other garment shops all over. News of a walk out in the biggest garment factory in the city seems to have caused quite a stir.” Chayele smiled.

“Do you think they'll call for a strike?” Ruth asked.

Mirele shrugged. “We're hoping so, but no one knows what exactly their intentions are.”

Zusa shushed them and pointed as three of the union leaders made their way up the steps to the stage.

One of the men stepped forward to the podium. He waited patiently until the chatter died down. Then he and the two other men addressed the crowd for the next forty-five minutes. What they were speaking about, Ruth and the others were unable to determine.

“Are they even making any sense?” Filomena whispered.

“Not really. They're saying something about negotiation with the owners.” Ruth shrugged. “But they're just repeating themselves as far as I can tell.”

“I didn't know if it was perhaps the language.” Filomena smiled.

“No, they're just trying to confuse us so we can't tell they're avoiding the subject of a strike.” Chayele twirled a lock of hair. “Cowards.”

“Is anything going to come from this or did we all just lose our jobs yesterday for nothing?” Zusa whimpered.

Ruth reached over and squeezed her hand. “Don't lose faith yet. Look at all the people here. Obviously, we're not the only ones looking for change.”

Suddenly, there was a disturbance on the floor. People began whispering and pointing as a huddled figure climbed over knees and feet to emerge from a row of chairs. Once in the aisle she lifted

her hands to straighten her hat. She then pulled herself up to her full height and walked with determination towards the stage. The whispers grew louder as people wondered aloud what she was doing. She climbed the steps to the stage and walked directly to the podium.

“Excuse me,” she said, waving her hand for the man to move. “I’m Clara Lemlich and I’d like to say a few words.”

The union leaders exchanged confused glances. The man at the podium looked over his shoulder at the other two men behind him for direction. Finally, one of them shrugged, and the man took a begrudging step back as the woman took over the podium.

She slammed her fist on the podium. “Enough of this *hok a chainik*. Let’s get to the point. Do we want to strike?”

From all corners of the room girls stood answering her question in unison, with a resounding yes.

“There’s power in numbers.” She smiled.

Chayele looked over at Ruth and took Ruth’s hand with her right hand and Zusa’s with her left. Ruth reached over with her other hand and grabbed Filomena’s hand. Within moments they were all linked together in a line.

“If you are all with me, you will follow me in taking this oath of loyalty.” Clara raised her right hand and waited for the rest of the room to follow. She then began saying in Yiddish. “If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.”

Ruth felt chills run down her spine as all in the room repeated the oath in unison. This was it. Change was about to happen. She felt it.

Clara nodded and stepped away from the podium. She turned back to the union leaders who were standing with their arms crossed, glaring at her.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” she said bowing to them. “I’ll leave you now to inform the factories

that the garment workers are on strike.”

The room erupted with cheers. Ruth and the girls jumped up and down, hugging in excitement. As she hugged Filomena, she looked over Filomena's shoulder and saw Abraham still leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and a strained expression on his face. She broke away from Filomena and ran over to him.

She put a hand on his arm. “Can't you try to be excited?”

He shrugged off her hand. “The masses have spoken. Hard to be excited though when I know the long road ahead of us. We'll see how excited you girls are after a few days on the picket line.”

“Do you have to be so pessimistic?” She turned her back to him and looked over the cheering crowd. Their faces were all flushed and they wore broad grins. Yes, she thought. This time would be different. It had to be.

Chapter Eight

January 1910- New York City

A gust of wind swirled through the picket line, allowing the bitter cold to cut through to the bone. Ruth gritted her teeth and mentally repeated her mind over matter speech. They had a purpose, a goal. A reason to be standing here, and a little cold was not going to divert them from that goal.

She shifted her weight and raised her picket sign over her head again. In the process she stepped into another icy puddle and winced. The hole in her shoe kept her right foot wet for most of the day. Mama kept giving her bits of cardboard to put inside the shoe to try to protect her from the wet snow and puddles. But since she was standing out in the elements all day with the picket line the cardboard kept dissolving, eventually leaving her exposed. As the wind blew through again, she pulled her hat down farther over her ears. It was the last of the good hats her family owned. Shared with Mama and Ester, it was a purple wool hat with pretty green and yellow flowers tucked in the brim. They'd been letting her take it each day she was on the picket line to keep her ears warm. Abraham came up behind her and wrapped his warm arm around her shoulders.

“You all right?” he asked.

Smiling, she nodded in response.

“Just that hole in my shoe again,” she said.

At that moment a brand new fancy black car with curtained windows and silver trim pulled up to the front of the factory. Ruth thought she'd heard the car called a limousine.

Chayele came up next to them and snorted. “Figures. We're all starving and Max Blanck refuses to give us a few extra dollars a week, but he can go out and buy himself a new car.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. They all watched as the car pulled to a stop in front of them. The crowd on

the picket line started yelling. Police ran up to the car to help escort Blanck to the factory safely. Abraham dropped his arm from her shoulders and held her hand tightly instead. Squeezing his hand, Ruth watched as Blanck stepped out of the back of the car. Looking him over, she could see that he was dressed in a tailored suit covered with a warm, unbuttoned luxurious wool coat and hat. She bit her lip in frustration. Why was it that just because he had been in America twenty years longer than she, he got to have it all while she had nothing?

Her stomach growled reminding her of the pitiful meal her family shared last night. Four potatoes shared among the six of them. Only to be followed by watered down oatmeal this morning. She doubted Max Blanck's stomach was growling right now. She gritted her teeth in anger. It was a matter of principle. All they were asking for were fair working conditions and steady pay that reflected their work, and yet the owners were stubbornly holding out. Many other factories in the city had already settled.

As the police provided a barrier between Blanck and the picket line, he looked over their way. His cold eyes locked with Ruth's for a moment, and she somehow felt his disdain for them all. There was no remorse or guilt for leaving them out standing in the cold day after day. He was definitely not wavering. Disgusted, she broke the gaze and looked back to Chayele and the rest of their weary rag-tag friends.

She knew the strike was affecting Mirele and Zusa even worse than her. They had been forced to leave their apartment and move in with more girls from the factory to cover rent. There were now ten of them living together, pooling their meager savings and working through the night sewing for neighbors. Each day the circles under their eyes looked darker. She was reminded of her time back in Russia. She thought she had escaped those times. America was supposed to be a fresh start. A democratic land full of promise and opportunity.

Abraham jerked her closer to him as the workers' cries grew louder, and some of them began

throwing rotten food at Blanck and the police officers. Blanck was almost to the door and as he turned back to look once more at the chaos ensuing she could almost see a sly grin broadening on his face before he ducked inside. As soon as his head disappeared, the police turned on the crowd.

The barriers were kicked aside and the shouts were soon quieted by punches and slaps. Caught up in the movement from the crowd she lost her hold on Abraham's hand.

“Ruth! *Gay Avek!*” he yelled.

“Abraham!” she yelled, but his head was lost in the crowd.

Pushing against the momentum of the crowd, she looked down beneath her and saw that the cold, dirty snow now glistened with drops of shiny, red blood. Around her she could see the police officers arresting and shaking their batons at arguing workers. Some of the girls' faces were beaten and bloody. She faintly heard Chayele and Filomena calling her name, but couldn't find them. Looking down again she saw her pretty purple hat trampled and muddy on the ground. The little yellow flower had broken off and was lying in the snowy street. She could not even remember the hat falling off. As she was leaning down to pick it up she felt a harsh knock on her head and heard Abraham's scream from far away.

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“I don't care about the principle of the matter.” Da yelled, slamming a fist on the kitchen table.

“You are going back to work and getting off that picket line!”

“Da, calm down. I'm fine. Barely a bump.” Ruth reached for his hand across the table.

He shook her off and jumped up from his chair. The force of his movement sent the chair falling over backwards.

“Barely a bump? You're all *fershlugina*.” He gestured at her head.

“Yes, but there were witnesses who saw the police hitting us,” she said.

“After your *fercockt* crowd threw rotten fruit at the man! I won't have you out there acting like one of those *chayas*. It's not proper! And what's it all for? So your family can starve? No, no more. You'll go back to work tomorrow.”

“I can't, Da. I can't become a scab now. We've come too far. I've sat in jail side by side with these girls. How could I betray them?”

Da threw his arms up into the air. “*Oy- yoy- yoy*, so going to jail is a badge of honor? And you're more beholden to these people than to your family? To your fiance'?”

Locking gazes with her father, she glared at him. Then sitting back in her chair she crossed her arms.

“We made a vow to the cause. Abraham understands.”

From the corner of the kitchen where he'd been leaning on the wall observing the argument, Abraham uncrossed his arms and stepped forward.

“No, Ruth, I don't.”

Ruth turned around in her chair to look at him.

“What?” she asked.

He sighed. “It was one thing when we were just standing there with our signs explaining the cause. But it's been two months. Two months of no pay, Ruth! And for what? You saw Max Blanck's face today. He's not losing any sleep over a bunch of workers demanding fair treatment. Instead he's paying off cops to bash heads for him. Nothing's changing. No, it's time to say we gave it our best and throw it in.”

She gaped at Abraham and then turned to her father nodded in agreement.

“So you want to betray the cause?” she scowled at Abraham.

Abraham put his hand on her shoulder and she shrugged it off. He stepped back as if stung.

“Ruth, I've been very patient. You knew I was only doing this for you.” He opened his arms to her as if begging her to understand. “It's time to be smart here. We can't continue starving our families for a losing cause. They're offering double pay and forgiveness to anyone who comes back to work. Think of that. We'd have enough to cover the family's expenses again and leftover to bring my family over in no time.”

She crossed her arms and stared at him with resentment. “And just be going back on our word. We took a vow, Abraham! Does that mean nothing to you? Or should I remember that when we say our own wedding vows?”

Abraham stared at the floor unable to look her in the eye. He said in a soft whisper. “I never took the vow.”

She reeled back in shock. “What?”

He looked up and shouted “I didn't take the vow, Ruth!” He punched the wall in frustration. “Damn it! You knew I didn't want to get involved in this. I explained my reasons. But you had to be such a *noodge* about it.”

She jumped up from her chair and stared up into his face. “A *noodge*? I thought I was honoring our dead brothers. I thought I was fighting for change. I thought I was standing up against injustice.” She poked him in the chest with her finger. “But scuse me. I didn't mean to be a *noodge* and force you to do the right thing.”

Da jumped from his chair. “Enough!”

They turned and looked at him in surprise.

“This has gone on long enough. Abraham keeps defending you, but Ruth you don't know all you speak of. You're in over your head.” Da wiped a hand over his haggard face. Spit clung to the corner of his mouth as he continued. “You think this is the worst violence they'll throw at you? A few paid off cops? That's nothing.”

Abraham looked at Da and opened his mouth to speak, but Da shushed him. Abraham slumped down into a chair with his face in his hands. Ruth frowned and crossed her arms.

“I might not have been on the front lines of Bloody Sunday, but I saw plenty, Da. I lived through the actual revolution while you two ran off to safety.” She sneered.

Da slammed his fist on the table. “Stop talking back! You think I don't know that?” His voice cracked, and he gulped back a sob. “I hate myself for letting you experience that. That's why I need to keep you safe now. These men are dangerous, Ruth, and you need to stop.”

She blinked back the tears burning behind her eyes. But despite her efforts they started to spill. To save face she ran from the kitchen. From behind her she heard Da slam into his bedroom and Abraham's cot creak under his weight in the kitchen.

She threw herself on the couch and covered her head with a pillow as she heard the front door open. Then Mama and Ester's murmured voices talking to Abraham. She waited for one of them to come in to check on her. But instead she heard the quiet squeaking of the bedroom door as Mama went into Da and then the creaking of the cot as Ester sat down next to Abraham.

Ruth sat up, confused, trying to understand what was happening. Was she being cast as the guilty party here? She was fighting for a safer working place for Ester. She was honoring Mama's son and making his death mean something. And yet she was the one sitting alone in the dark.

Faintly she heard Abraham snuffle and Ester cooing in a soothing voice. With a guilty shudder, Ruth realized he was crying.

“Ruth?”

She lifted the pillow from her head and looked up to see Samuel hovering awkwardly by the doorway.

She sat up and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“Oh, Samuel. I'm sorry. Please come sit down.”

He sat down on the edge of the couch next to her with his hat clutched between his hands.

They sat there in silence for a moment. Ruth wracked her brain for something to say. He must hate her for making his son cry. How mortifying. Samuel finally cleared his throat.

“This is a difficult situation for everyone.” He angled his body to look at her. “And believe it or not, we do all understand how you are feeling. I don't even think you are wrong. But, you're prioritizing the dead right now, Ruth.”

She opened her mouth to defend herself, but he patted her on the knee.

“Let me finish. We all lost someone important to us that day. And it breaks my heart even further to think of all of you left behind in the aftermath.” He shook his head and paused a moment to choose his next words carefully. “Max Blanck isn't the czar. Defeating him will not bring back your brother. Just think on that.”

He stood and walked from the room before she could say anything. In the silence left in his wake, she heard Abraham speaking to Ester about the guilt he was carrying.

“I feel responsible. I couldn't save them,” he sobbed.

“Sh-h, no one expected you to,” Ester said. “We can only thank God that he spared you.”

Ruth stood and walked closer to the doorway to hear them more clearly.

“I just couldn't live with myself if it happened again.” He sniffled. “I can't watch Ruth die too, Ester. I wouldn't be able to go on.”

“Ruth is jumping in with both feet and following her emotions. That's what she does.” Ester said, measuring her words. “But she's stronger than you think. She carried all of the burdens for Mama and me while we were in Russia.”

Ruth smiled and backed away from her eavesdropping. Leave it to her sister to defend her and smooth the waves. Always the peacekeeper. Even as a child she'd been the go-between when Ruth and Jeremiah fought. Both she and Jeremiah were equally stubborn, thick as walls, her mother

affectionately called them. At least some things had stayed the same.

Hearing Abraham's confession of guilt gnawed at Ruth. He felt responsible. He wished he could've done more. She thought about what Samuel had said about her prioritizing the dead. She looked out the window at the busy street below. The marketplace was buzzing with energy as usual. People on their way home from work were stopping to pick up dinner. Somehow despite the atrocities on the picket line today, the city was unaffected. Was this just the way the world worked everywhere? Evil happened and life went on?

She pictured Mirele and Zusa in their apartment right now. She knew that, despite being beaten today, they were still probably busy sewing and washing clothes. Filomena and Chayele had been among the group arrested. Had they been released yet? The union said they'd put up the funds to make bail for everyone. How would she feel if she went back to work and something happened to them?

Samuel was wrong; she wasn't doing this for the dead. She was doing this for the girls who had no family to rely upon. The girls who needed a voice to change their future. They might not be the living Samuel wanted her to focus on, but she knew deep in her heart that this was where her attention needed to be.

It was dark and Ester was still sleeping on her side of the couch the next morning when Ruth slipped out from the blankets and got dressed. She heard Samuel's steady snores as she tiptoed towards the kitchen. Perhaps if she could make it without bumping any furniture she could slip out the front door without anyone noticing. They wouldn't come and drag her off the picket line. She made it halfway across the kitchen before she heard a match strike.

“Going somewhere?” Abraham whispered.

He was sitting at the kitchen table fully dressed.

She took a small step towards the door. “Please don't try and stop me. I don't want to fight with

you anymore.”

He sighed. “I'm not. I knew you'd go back.”

“Then why are you up and dressed?” She gestured to his clothing.

He shrugged. “I might not agree with you, but I wasn't going to let you go by yourself. I promised to protect you, remember?”

“But you said you couldn't watch me get hurt again.”

He got up, grabbed their coats and held hers out to her. “Then don't get hurt again, ya?”

She nodded and opened the door. He gestured for her to go ahead of him and they headed out side by side into the cold morning air.

Chapter Nine

February 1910- New York City:

Ruth's chilled fingers curled around the warm cup of hot cocoa in her hand. She bent her face over the cup and breathed in the warm steam, enjoying the brief reprieve from the cold. She held her elbows out in a protective stance to prevent anyone from banging into her and spilling the precious beverage.

“You better drink up quick. It won't stay warm long,” Chayele said coming up behind her.

“Then I'll just have to get a refill.” Ruth took a small sip from the cup.

Chayele snorted. “Provided they stick around.”

Ruth took another sip, savoring the warm beverage as it slid down her frozen throat.

“Why are you so cynical? They've been coming every day for weeks.”

“As long as the publicity is here.” Chayele gestured to the reporters across the street. “It was a great perk from the beat down. The Fifth Avenue “Mink Brigade” marching down here to save us with hot soup and cocoa. But we're old news again. How much longer do you think they'll forego their afternoon tea?”

Ruth bit her lip considering Chayele's words. When the story of the police officers' brutality against them broke in late January, support poured in. The majority of the garment workers were female, inspiring a group of upper-class women, calling themselves suffragettes, to feel sympathetic for their plight.

The suffragettes showed up at union headquarters offering money to bail out the unjustly imprisoned as well as to pay overdue rent and bills. They then appeared at the picket line with packed cars full of blankets and warm food and crowded around the girls asking for details about conditions in

the factory.

“They decreased our wages by three dollars since last year!” one girl complained. “They claim it's because the stock market went down. Well, my rent hasn't.”

A small Italian girl piped up. “We're forced to work eighty-four hours a week during busy seasons with no extra pay.”

“And they charge us for materials like needles and thread for our machines,” Filomena called out.

Chayele elbowed Ruth in the back and gestured for her to speak. Ruth took a deep breath. “And trick us out of pay by promising us promotions and then calling it unpaid training.”

The women shook their heads and clucked sympathetically. As more girls came forward with examples, the women's anger mounted at the injustice. Twisting her hands together nervously, Ruth finally took the chance to reveal the worst secret and told them her story about walking in on the foreman with the young girl from the kindergarten corner.

“How old was this girl?” a heavysset woman with pearls bulging at her throat asked.

“She couldn't have been more than thirteen or fourteen.” Ruth said.

“I thought girls that young weren't allowed to work in the factory.” A thin woman fidgeted with her gloves.

“That's the law, but it's not usually enforced,” Chayele said.

“And you say he was forcing himself on her?” The heavy woman pursed her lips. “You're sure she wasn't offering herself?”

“Of course, she wasn't.” Ruth snapped. “She was terrified and screaming.”

The cluster of women was silent. A few looked down at the ground and avoided Ruth's eyes. Others shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Finally, the heavy woman nodded and walked away from the group. She returned a moment later with a reporter in tow.

“Tell him your story then.”

Walking home from the picket line that day, Abraham was livid when she told him.

“You told a reporter and used your real name?” His eyes widened in horror. “They're going to quote you in the paper!”

She waved her hand widely. “Isn't that the point? To get the truth out to the public about what is really going on at the factory.”

“I seriously don't know what is wrong with you sometimes.” His jaw clenched as he gritted his teeth. “To think you spoke of this to upper-class ladies.”

“And why shouldn't I have? They were asking for the truth.”

He gaped at her. “Because it's improper, Ruth! Women should not speak of such things.” His hands balled up into fists at his sides. “And now you're going to have your name in print so Max Blanck will know exactly who to blame.”

She pulled back on his arm so he'd face her. “I'm not the one that performed the filthy action. Are we just supposed to turn a blind eye to these horrors because it's improper to speak of them? And someone has to speak up against Max Blanck. I had the opportunity, so I took it.”

He shrugged her off and continued on without answering.

The article came out the next day causing a huge uproar. Overflowing cars pulled up in front of the factory, unloading more women in fur coats. Reporters lined up in rows three and four people deep on the sidewalk across the street. But there was no sign of Blanck. He refused to comment or even be seen in public for days. He kept pulling his strings out of sight though. He was devilishly creative, Ruth had to give him that.

Since the police were under observation after receiving so much criticism for being men picking

on women, he decided to get other women to intimidate them instead. The striking workers showed up a week after the article appeared to find prostitutes circling around the perimeter of the picket line heckling and throwing stones at them. As soon as tempers flared and the fights began in retaliation, the police swooped in and arrested the girls on the picket line allowing the prostitutes to flee.

But once again after the union and the suffragettes settled up the fines for bail, the workers returned to the picket line the following day. So he responded by finding a new source of labor and sent recruiters down to the docks to get workers right off the boats from Europe. Unable to speak the language they didn't understand what was happening on the picket line. So they'd pull up in guarded cars in front of the factory and were escorted right into work.

With a fully functioning factory again, his attempts to quash the picket line subsided. But the garment workers still refused to back down. Each day they returned to the picket line, bundled up to face the cold, clutching signs saying "We'd rather starve quick, than starve slow," demanding to be heard. However, with no resolution in sight, the reporters' interest waned. The sidewalk was less occupied each day until there were only a few die-hard supporters wielding their notepads and pencils remaining. As the reporters disappeared, so did the carloads of suffragettes. Chayele's worries were not unfounded. They were in the middle of February, the fourth month on the picket line, and had very little to show for it.

As Ruth finished off the last of her hot chocolate, a car pulled up in front of them. The demonstrators sprang to life yelling to catch the occupants' attention. The remaining reporters scribbled in their notebooks. The car door opened and out stepped two of the union leaders. A hush fell over the picket line as the tall, balding man and a shorter, red-faced man approached the crowd. This was the first time any of the union leaders had come down to the picket line. They were handling the entire behind-the-scenes work back at the union office. The reporters began a rapid-fire assault of questions.

"Have you been communicating with Mr. Blanck?"

“Any news of a resolution?”

The tall man held out a hand to wave off the reporters.

“We are here to speak with our supporters. Please allow us to do so.”

The reporters fell silent, but elbowed forward closer to the picket line.

The picket line was silent. Girls held their breath and dropped their signs as they grabbed for each others' hands. Abraham came up behind Ruth and clapped a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and patted his hand with hers.

The men exchanged a look before the shorter man cleared his throat and spoke.

“The strike is over.”

The picket line erupted with cheers. Hats flew up into the air as the crowd began to celebrate.

“Wait! Wait!” the tall man shouted. “You need to listen!”

A few minutes passed before the excitement subsided and he could continue.

“A resolution was not met with Mr. Blanck.”

“Then how is the strike over?” shouted a cutter from the back of the crowd.

The tall man ignored the question. “But you will be going back to work. The union will no longer be supporting you.”

“What about a salary increase?” Chayele shouted.

The shorter man responded. “He has agreed to raise your wages by two dollars and to pay for electricity and needles. But your hours will not be cut. And you will not have union representation.”

“But all the other factories agreed to shorter hours!” another girl shouted.

“And what about the safety concerns and abuse?” a man shouted.

Uneasiness had settled in, and people were chattering amongst themselves throughout the crowd. The union leaders sensing the crowd turning, gestured frantically in the front begging for quiet.

“As I said. Mr. Blanck has not agreed to a resolution.” The shorter man's face was even redder

than before and sweat was beading on his forehead despite the cold. He tugged on his collar before continuing. “You will have a job if you return. Work begins tomorrow. But these are the only compromises he will offer. He will be implementing his own in-house union moving forward. So you must go to them with any further concerns.”

They turned and began to walk back to the car.

“So that's it?” Chayele shouted. “You're just leaving us now?”

They ignored her cries and picked up their pace. The crowd pushed the barriers away and ran after them. Seeing the crowd gaining on them, they sprinted the rest of the way and ducked into the car. The crowd descended, screaming and banging on the windows and doors of the car as it pulled away from the curb.

Later that evening, Ruth swirled around the cabbage soup in her bowl with her spoon, ignoring her mother's anxious stare. She knew she had barely touched her dinner since they sat down, but didn't care. Ever since the union leaders made the announcement she felt like there was a chunk of coal sitting in her stomach. Her family all tried to talk to her when she got home, but she just didn't have it in her to muster up any responses to their attempts at looking on the positive side of things. There was no positive side how could they not see that? They were folding. Giving up without even gaining anything for their efforts. The only positive outcome she could see in the whole mess was that Abraham and her father were somehow managing to restrain themselves from gloating and saying “I told you so.”

A knock at the door disrupted Ruth's wallowing. Samuel got up to answer it and was greeted by a uniformed driver with a pinched expression wiping his hand on his trousers as if just touching the door while knocking had been distasteful for him.

“Is Miss Feldman here?”

Samuel narrowed his eyes and frowned. “Who's asking?”

The driver straightened his jacket and stood up straighter. “Mr. Blanck sent me. He wishes to speak with her at once.”

Abraham jumped from the table and strode towards the door. “What does he want with her?”

The driver stepped back away from the door and leaned back on his heels. “My instructions were just to escort her to the factory, sir. That was all I was told.”

Samuel, Abraham and Da exchanged nervous glances. Ruth slammed her chair back and rose for her coat.

“You're actually going to go?” Da asked.

She gestured towards the driver. “We can't make the man stand here all night.”

“Well, you're not going anywhere by yourself.” Abraham grabbed his coat.

Da crossed his arms and glared at them. “This could be a trap. He wants revenge for the article.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Yes, his driver is going to drive us out of the city and dispose of us.”

The driver harrumphed and looked down at the floor.

“You jest, but I somehow doubt his motivations are friendly, Ruth.” Da scowled.

She patted him on the shoulder. “Only one way to find out.”

Pecking him on the cheek she took off out the door with Abraham close on her heels.

She slammed to a stop on the sidewalk though when she saw the limo waiting for them at the curb.

He'd sent his best car for them. Da's suspicious nature was rubbing off on her. Max Blanck was definitely not a generous or frivolous man. In fact, she'd classify him more as an extremely calculating man. So why was he sending his driver and best car to fetch her to him after hours? She glanced up at Abraham with nervous eyes. He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze as they ducked into the backseat of the luxurious car.

They pulled up to the curb outside the Triangle Factory ten minutes later. Ruth's heart pounded

in her chest as the driver escorted them into the darkened building. She'd never before seen the building so quiet and dimly lit. She felt like a trespasser intruding upon the eerie calm. They entered the foyer and the driver startled her by directing them towards the elevators where they were greeted by the elevator operator, Joseph, with a shy smile and nod. The factory workers were normally expected to take the stairs, leaving the elevators for the owners and the rest of their administrative staff on the executive floor.

Ruth had seen Joseph and the other elevator operator, Gaspar, around the factory but her interactions with them were quite limited. They were always congenial to the staff, greeting them in the lobby with kind smiles and small talk about the weather or newsworthy events. She always appreciated that they made the effort. It demonstrated that although they rubbed elbows with the executives all day, they still lumped themselves in with the other workers.

She stepped into the elevator and her eyes swept over every detail, taking notice of the plush carpet and gold plated gates that folded across the doors as the elevator lurched upwards. She gasped and grabbed Abraham's arm at the sudden movement.

“First time in an elevator, miss?” Joseph laughed.

She nodded slightly. She was embarrassed by the admission.

He leaned over and whispered, “If it makes you feel better, I'd never even seen an elevator before coming to America a year ago. We just took the stairs in Italy. I wonder if that makes us stronger or just stupid?”

Ruth let out a loud laugh and marveled again at this man's kindness. Her tension suddenly dissipated. She looked over at Abraham again and he squeezed her hand and smiled as the bell rang signaling their arrival on the tenth floor.

“Good luck, Miss,” Joseph said, tipping his hat at her.

She took a deep breath and stepped out onto the empty factory floor. An office light shone in the

distance from the back of the room. She shuddered as she recognized the similarity of the setting from the night she'd walked in on the foreman with the girl.

“Let's get this over with.” Abraham frowned and tugged her towards the lit office.

She bit her lip as they neared the office and she saw Max Blanck's tilted head through the glass window as he scribbled furiously at his desk. He looked up at the sound of them approaching and leapt to his feet.

“Miss Feldman. How good of you to accept my invitation and come meet with me. And I see you brought your betrothed as well.” He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk. “Please, come and sit.”

Ruth and Abraham exchanged a look and lowered themselves to the edges of the two seats facing his desk. Ruth folded her hands in her lap trying to steady her right leg from twitching and tapping on the floor beneath her.

Blanck sat back at his desk across from them and his lips curved into a smug grin.

“It's been quite a few months, hasn't it?” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms behind his head. “A very trying time, I must say. Just so much to do and deal with. I don't believe I've gotten a good night's sleep in weeks.”

He lurched back forward in his chair slamming his hands on his desk. “But enough about me.” He opened his desk drawer and withdrew a folded newspaper with a flourish. “I wanted to applaud your contributions in person, Miss Feldman.”

Ruth's leg tapped harder, and she tried to dig her wrist into her thigh in a last attempt to steady it.

He gestured towards her with the newspaper. “I'm a huge believer that true strength comes from the individual, not the masses.” He unfolded the newspaper and smoothed it out on his desk. “Although the picket line drew attention for the mass persistence, not much about it actually stood out, did it? But

your article, Ms. Feldman, that individual act drew some attention.”

He paused and surveyed her for a moment. She looked away and gulped a deep breath. He flexed his hand over the article on the desk and smiled. Savoring the moment and his command of power, she guessed.

Abraham leaned forward and put his hands on the edge of the desk. “What do you want exactly, Mr. Blanck?”

“Ah, yes. I guess it is getting late then.” Blanck nodded. “My point is this, the masses were easy to squash and get in line. But there are a few individuals, you proving yourself to be one of them now, that I wish to handle a bit differently. More personally, if you will.”

He got to his feet and came around to lean on the front of the desk inches away from Ruth.

“I want to make you one of my new union leaders.”

“What?” Ruth gasped.

“I’m setting up our own in-house union. I want you to be one of the new leaders. You know, to handle the workers’ complaints and such.”

Ruth leaned back in her chair and glared. “So basically, one of your puppets.”

He chuckled and looked at Abraham. “She really does speak her mind, doesn’t she?”

“Look, I’m not going to spy for you.” She crossed her arms in front of her. “I’m not going to make a mockery of what is supposed to be an organization representing the workers’ rights.”

“You’d get a promotion as well. Back to the finishing table again. And training would be paid this time.” He smiled.

“As it should always be. But my answer is still no.” She stood from her chair and turned away from him.

“I don’t think you realize the situation you’re in.” He mocked. “This isn’t really a choice.”

Abraham got to his feet and stepped towards Ruth to stop her. “What happens if she doesn’t take

your offer?"

Blanck shrugged. "She loses her job. I forbid any other factory from taking her. Same for you and her little sister."

Ruth turned back towards him.

Blanck moved back around his desk and picked up a pile of papers. "Oh and her friends too. Those four girls she sits with." He looked up and winked. "See not really a choice, is it?"

Ruth looked at Abraham as she choked back a sob.

"What if I took the position instead?" Abraham asked.

A smile spread across Blanck's face. "Interesting. She speaks her mind and you cover her tracks? You better watch the precedent you're setting for this marriage."

"Enough." Abraham shouted. "You'll promote me to a collar and leave her be."

Blanck nodded. "You better keep her in line though. Any sign of disruption again and you're all out on the street, understand?"

Abraham hardened his shoulders and nodded. "*Farshstanen*. Got your message loud and clear, sir."

Blanck dropped the papers he was holding and looked towards Abraham. The two stood, gazes locked for a moment. Finally, he looked back down to his desk again.

"Have Joseph take you to the car. My driver will take you home. You'll begin your new position tomorrow, Mr. Reznik."

Abraham turned and tugged at Ruth's arm. His fingers left impressions on her flesh as he swept her from the office without a backwards glance. He strode towards the elevators, but Ruth dug in her heels. Scowling at him, she ripped her arm away from his and ran towards the entrance to the stairs instead. She slammed open the door and barreled down the stairs. Abraham huffed behind her, close on her heels. He caught her and swung her up against the wall.

“What is wrong with you? You're mad at me right now?”

She choked out a sob. “How could you give in to him?”

Abraham gaped at her. “What choice did I have Ruth? I had to protect you.”

“At the expense of everyone else?” she cried.

“At the expense of them? I saved them.”

She pushed him away so he stumbled. “There's always a choice, Abraham.”

She heard him slam his fist into the wall and curse as she took off running down the rest of the stairs.

Chapter Ten

May 1910- New York City:

The spring sun beckoned to Ruth and her friends as they waited in line to have their bags inspected. It was a beautiful Saturday in May, and they were all anxious to begin their weekend. However, the guards sensing this and choosing to be antagonistic, were taking extra time to poke through the girls' bags.

“What is this the Inquisition or something?” Chayele shouted. “You're performing purse inspections not cavity searches here!”

One of the guards looked up and sneered at her before returning to the bag he was searching.

Filomena reached over and patted Chayele on the arm. “The beautiful day will still be there when we get out.”

“Ya, just perhaps not the sun.” Chayele grumbled. “I swear, they've only gotten more obnoxious since the strike. Talk about a waste of time. Did anything good come from that?”

Zusa shrugged. “Two more dollars a week?”

They all snickered, but they'd had similar exchanges often over the past three months. The fact was very little had changed since the strike, and it was a raw subject.

Ruth cringed as Ester's voice piped up from behind them. “Shouldn't you all just be happy you still have a job?”

Chayele whirled around. “You sure have a lot to say for someone who wasn't there.”

Ester opened her mouth to say something else, but stopped as Ruth scowled. This was not the first time Ester had stepped on a few toes.

Chayele turned back to Ruth and shot her a dirty look before changing the subject. Ruth sighed.

She knew the girls only tolerated Ester's rudeness because of their friendship with her. She didn't know why Ester couldn't just keep her mouth shut. Or how she'd even come to hold such opinions, for that matter.

The line moved forward finally, bringing them face to face with the guards. The sneering guard locked eyes with Chayele before emptying the contents of her purse on the floor. Chayele lurched forward towards him, while Filomena and Zusa leapt on her back.

“Let it go, please,” Filomena begged.

The guard let out a deep laugh while the other gave him a hearty pat on the back.

“That'll teach you to mouth off, huh *chaya?*” he growled.

They walked off chuckling while the girls dropped to the floor to gather her belongings.

Chayele blinked a few times and flipped her hair in front of her reddened face. The girls looked away pretending not to see. They knew Chayele needed to save face. Ruth remembered Filomena whispering to them in awe the day after the beat down on the picket line.

“She had blood dripping into her eyes from a cut on her head and they hit her again while forcing her into the jail cell. But Chayele, she barely released a whimper. I cried like a baby when they got to me.”

Chayele refused to be weak. Ester stood up with the last hair pin in her palm. She walked over to where Chayele kneeled and held it out to her. Chayele avoided making eye contact with Ester, but accepted it wordlessly before getting to her feet and cracking a half-smile.

“Let's try to catch the last of that sunlight, shall we?” she said.

The girls nodded and took off for the stairs. Despite the incident with the guards and the tension radiating off Chayele, Ruth was in a good mood. It had been a pretty easy week at the factory. The weather was finally great. And she was even pondering the idea of asking Abraham to go out with her to the movies this evening. Maybe they could pump some fun back into this engagement of theirs. She

tilted her head back and laughed as Filomena finished the punch line of a joke and pushed the front door open with Chayele. Then they both looked up and came to a slamming halt.

Standing across the street from the factory was the heavy-set woman from the Mink Brigade. Ruth hadn't seen her since the last day of the strike. Hundreds of regrets and memories floated through Ruth's mind. If it hadn't been for that woman, the article would never have been published in the paper. Abraham wouldn't have been blackmailed into becoming "union leader". And Abraham and she wouldn't have spent the last few months barely on speaking terms.

The woman stepped forward towards them. Ruth exchanged looks with Chayele and the rest of the girls. She knew they harbored anger towards the woman and her suffragette friends as well for abandoning the cause after the union leaders folded. There had barely been a write-up in the newspaper about the strike ending. It was like everyone forgot about them in an instant.

Ester, oblivious to the tension, stepped around them and strode towards Abraham who stood on the street corner talking with Yankel. Ruth looked after her, envying her ignorance for a moment.

"Ruth?" The woman smiled. "Just the girl I was looking for. We were never formally introduced, but I'm Lucy Moore."

Ruth ignored the woman's outstretched hand. "And why are you looking for me?"

Lucy appeared to be startled by Ruth's hostility. But tucking her hand away she continued on.

"I'm hoping we can renew our previous alliance."

Chayele pushed past Ruth towards Lucy. "And why should we put ourselves out for you again after you abandoned us?"

"Abandoned you? Whatever do you mean?"

"After the strike ended." Chayele scowled. "You and your Mink Brigade friends cleared out of here without a backwards glance."

"And what would you have had us do? The union leaders settled." She gestured towards the

building behind them. “Max Blanck shut down any further chance for negotiation. What pull did you believe we had? We were only volunteers fighting for the cause like you.”

“But the reporter,” Ruth sputtered.

“That was all you. Your courage to speak the truth.” Lucy patted Ruth's arm. “I just brought him over to you.”

“But if he liked the story, why didn't he report the end of the strike?” Filomena asked.

Lucy laughed. “You honestly believed a man like Max Blanck would allow any other negative press to be printed? He's a man with very deep pockets and a fierce temper.”

She reached into her bag and took out a handful of papers. “But these reasons are why I need you girls to join me now. To take down powerful people like Max Blanck, we need to go over his head.”

Ruth saw Chayele lift an eyebrow skeptically. Ruth glanced over her shoulder toward Abraham and Ester. Abraham was getting antsy. He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and she could see his pockets bulging from his hands fisted inside. She turned back to Lucy and accepted the flier Lucy thrust into her hands. But looking down at it, she could not read any of the English words printed across the page. Despite becoming more comfortable speaking the language, she still had yet to find Abraham-approved sources with which to practice reading.

“Look, Mrs. Moore, I don't know what you're looking for here.” She thrust the paper back into Lucy's hands. “But we're not in a position to get involved with the suffragettes right now. We have work each day and very little time to spare.”

Lucy clasped Ruth's hand as she turned away. “But the factory is closed on Sundays, is it not? Which means you are free tomorrow.”

“Why didn't you wait for me?” Ruth slammed the front door behind her.

“Because you were taking too long.” Abraham yawned and turned a page of the *Yiddish Daily* spread before him on the table. “I didn't feel like waiting for you to finish *shmoozing* with some rich *shiksa*.”

She put her hands on her hips. “What about your promise to Da?”

He shrugged. “Well, I knew Ester needed me to walk her home before dark. You seemed to be in safe hands with your friends.”

She exhaled a deep breath. She was not going to take the bait and get into another fight with him. Not tonight. She could perhaps still salvage her plans for this evening.

She sat in the chair across from him at the table. “So do you want to hear what we were speaking about?”

He sighed, but did not look up from the newspaper. “Not really. I somehow figure anything concerning that woman will only make me upset.”

She reached across the table and cupped her hand over his. “Please Abraham, I'm trying to include you here.”

He scowled but folded the newspaper in half on the table in front of him. “Fine, Ruth, what did you speak about? But before you share, remember I'm still indebted to Mr. Blanck, and you promised you wouldn't cause any further disturbances in the factory.”

She rolled her eyes. “This has nothing to do with the factory. I'm joining the suffragettes and marching in the parade tomorrow for women's rights.”

“A parade? Ruth, don't you ever stop?”

He stood and walked towards the door.

Ruth jumped to her feet. “Wait, where are you going? I thought we could do something together tonight.”

He turned around to face her. “I just don't have the patience to deal with this right now, Ruth.

I'm going to go meet Yankel. Don't wait up."

He took his hat off the hook and slammed out the door. Ruth stared at the closed door before slumping down to the chair by the table. That definitely hadn't gone the way she'd hoped.

An hour later, Ruth sat on the couch in the parlor plunging the needle through the ripped hemline of her gray skirt. Lucy had said to wear white or the lightest color you owned tomorrow as a way to distinguish the supporters of the cause. She couldn't believe she was spending her evening off at home sewing. She'd hoped Abraham would return soon after he'd cooled off, but that didn't seem to be the case. He was not usually a drinking man, but she had a feeling he was making an exception this evening. She still couldn't understand why the news of the parade made him so angry.

"May I come in, Ruth?" Ester stood in the doorway.

Ruth shrugged. "It's your room too."

Ester skittered across the room to the chair by the window.

Ruth sighed. "I know you heard everything, Ester. You don't have to avoid me."

Ester lifted her gaze halfway and cleared her throat. "I just don't want you to be angry with me."

Ruth frowned. "Why? Because you disagree with me also?"

Ester chewed on a fingernail and looked down at her lap. "I worry about you being manipulated, Ruth."

"Manipulated? How?" Ruth dropped her skirt in her lap and looked up at Ester.

"What do you know about this woman? Why didn't she check up on you after the article was printed?" Ester's voice shook. "Max could have sent thugs after you like he did to Clara Lemlich. You were lucky, but she didn't know that. She pushed you into sharing that story with the press and then left you alone to suffer the consequences."

Ruth looked down to her lap and picked up her skirt again with unsteady fingers.

“She knew I could handle it,” she mumbled. “She said I was strong and called me a born leader.”

Ester picked up her chair and moved it closer to Ruth. “A born leader for what exactly? What does she want from you?”

“Why do her intentions have to be suspicious? I'm not worth someone's attention?” Ruth snapped.

Ester raised her hands as if to deflect Ruth's words. “I'm not saying that. I just want to know what she wants you to do. You have to see that your life is very different from hers. She has very little to lose while you could lose everything.”

Ruth mulled over Ester's words a moment. Was she being manipulated? Was Lucy feeding her lines? But she appeared to be sincere. She'd driven Ruth home so they could speak in private and complimented her on being brave enough to speak out against Blanck in the article. She'd even given Ruth advice to handle her difficulties at home.

“Give your fiance' time and he'll come around,” Lucy had said, leaning her head back on the plush leather car seat. “He just needs to understand how important this all is to you. If he cares for you the way you believe he does, he'll support you, and you'll find a compromise that works. My husband and I did.”

Listening to her words of hope and wisdom, Ruth had been able to breathe easily for the first time in weeks. She had believed Lucy and been ready to give Abraham the space he needed until he came around. But now with Ester staring her down and questioning Lucy's motives, Ruth wasn't as sure.

A smug smile spread across Ester's lips, and Ruth's moment of uncertainty passed.

Ruth threw her sewing down and jumped to her feet. “You're one to talk. What do you know of any of this? You've just become Da and Abraham's puppet repeating everything they've said over the

dinner table the last few months.”

“I have not! Just because I agree with them doesn't mean I'm not forming my own opinions. I lived through the revolution too, Ruth. I saw the damage it caused.”

“Then how can you be so blind? That young girl I saw was your age!” Ruth screamed. She swallowed and took a deep breath. “You're a young woman with every American freedom at your fingertips. A right to a voice, a chance to benefit from democracy. Yet you refuse to stand up for yourself and take advantage of them. Why?”

Ester scowled. “Because I refuse to be selfish like you.”

“Selfish?” Ruth frowned. “How am I being selfish?”

Ester sighed. “We lived through hell in Russia. But that was at least out of our control. It surrounded us, and the czar and the government made it impossible to avoid. But you're seeking out this fight. You're the one making our lives difficult.”

“But sometimes things have to become more difficult before they can get better,” Ruth said swinging her arm widely.

“I already did difficult. I'm done with difficult.” Ester plucked the folds of her skirt in her lap. “After surviving what we did in Russia, I just want life to be simple.”

Ruth stared at her for a minute before turning away. What could she say to that? From behind her she could hear Ester clear her throat.

“Abraham feels the same way, Ruth.”

Ruth whirled around. “What do you know of what Abraham wants?”

Ester jumped to her feet. “I listen to him. Something you should be doing! It's not fair what you're doing to him. He's too good a man to be dragged into these fights against his will.”

“Back off Ester, you're crossing the line now,” Ruth snarled.

“Fine,” Ester shrugged. “Ignore me. That seems to be expected from you these days.”

She stalked off to the kitchen. Ruth slumped to the couch and picked up her sewing again with shaking fingers.

Later that night Ruth woke to the click of the front door opening and Abraham's quiet footsteps across the kitchen floor. She slid off the couch and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. Ester lifted her head up from her pillow and whispered in a sleepy voice, "You better be apologizing to him and not picking another fight."

"It's not your business, remember?" Ruth scolded.

Ester sighed and flipped over to her other side.

Ruth shuffled towards the kitchen where Abraham stood over the sink gulping down a glass of water.

"Where have you been?" she whispered. "I was worried."

He shrugged. "Out. I needed to clear my head."

She stepped towards him. "About tomorrow."

He held up a hand stopping her. "I'll walk you there and pick you up. But that's it. I'm not staying, and we're not speaking of this again."

He looked so beaten down and tired. She knew she was responsible for imposing this strain on him and should feel badly for it. But all she felt was excitement that he was allowing her to participate in the parade tomorrow.

"Thank you, Abraham," she whispered.

He nodded and sat down on his cot next to Samuel's sleeping form. She watched as he removed his shoes and without even changing out of his clothes, lay back to sleep. She tiptoed out of the kitchen back to her couch.

They left the next morning for the parade in silence. The warm sunshine danced on her shoulders, and she tilted her face up to the sky to enjoy it, while Abraham pulled his hat down lower to block it out. He reached up to rub his temples and mumbled something under his breath. She put her hand on his arm in a comforting gesture, but he yanked his arm away and quickened his pace. Ruth trailed behind, practically having to run to keep up.

As they neared the starting place for the parade, the crowds grew larger. Abraham walked in front, with his elbows out, clearing a pathway. The color white surrounded them and beautiful women decorated with pins and banners with witty slogans handed out fliers. A line of cars was straight ahead with a large group of women standing in front. Ruth recognized Lucy and waved to get her attention. Lucy had said the cars were meant to be the focal point of the parade. The suffragettes were trying to illustrate the point that if women were capable of driving, why shouldn't they be capable of voting? Lucy saw Ruth and waved her over to the group.

“Go ahead,” Abraham grunted. “I’ll be back in three hours.”

Ruth nodded. She knew he was really telling her she better be waiting for him, or else. She checked her watch and made a mental note. She couldn't take another fight this weekend. She hurried off towards Lucy and the others then. Chayele grinned as Ruth joined them.

“Isn't this amazing?” Chayele gushed. “Half of New York City is here.”

Ruth snickered at Chayele's exaggeration, but she did marvel at the turn out. It was more than she'd expected.

“All right, ladies. I have room for one more to sit in the car with us. The others will march behind,” Lucy said.

Chayele grinned and took a step towards the car.

“Oh wait. Ruth! I didn't see you there.” Lucy smiled and waved her towards the car. “Ruth, come ride with us. You need to meet everyone.”

Ruth took a hesitant step forward as Chayele scowled at her. Lucy stepped towards Ruth, ignoring Chayele, and slung an arm around her shoulders.

“I’ve told them all about you,” Lucy gushed. She looked back over her shoulder at the others. “Thank you girls for supporting us by marching. We’ll see you all at the end.”

Ruth looked away uncomfortably from Chayele’s harsh expression and tried to focus on what Lucy was saying. As she settled in the car, she glanced out the window to her left and saw Ester pushing her way through the crowd. Her heart leapt as she imagined Ester changing her mind and coming to join the parade.

But then Ester stopped as someone caught her arm and pulled her back. Abraham came into view next to her, and Ruth watched as Abraham took the marketing basket from Ester’s hand and held it for her. Ester tilted her head back and laughed at something he said, and he smiled. Ruth frowned as she realized that the tired and pained expression he’d worn with her this morning was now gone. He took Ester’s arm and steered her back through the crowd and away from the car where Ruth sat. Ruth sorted through the confused feelings that flooded her as the car clicked into motion and began to move forward. She was glad Ester was there for him when he needed someone. But when was the last time either of them had laughed or smiled with her?

“Ruth? Have you met Mrs. Schar yet?”

Ruth looked up as Lucy interrupted her swirling thoughts.

“She’s been absolutely fascinated by your story,” Lucy gushed.

“No, I haven’t.” Ruth leaned forward to join the conversation. She’d think about Ester and Abraham later. She’d come up with something to make it up to them. They couldn’t stay angry forever.

Chapter Eleven

March 24, 1911- New York City

The March sunlight danced on the water as Da led the family in prayer. A seagull swooped down from overhead and squawked, adding his voice. They sat by the arrivals gate waiting for Abraham's family to get through the checkpoints at Ellis Island. Samuel spotted the new immigrants first, waved and shouted to his wife, Sarah, in Yiddish. She pushed through the crowd and jumped into his arms. The kids found Abraham and wrapped their arms around his waist.

“Benyamin, Calev, you boys are huge,” Abraham laughed. The kid brothers he'd left behind were now gangly young teens. And his toddler sister was almost ten. Ruth could see the emotions clouding his eyes as he reflected on the time lost. She wished she could comfort him in some way, but the bridge between them had become too wide. She stood by and watched him clutch his three siblings as if squeezing them tight could bring back the years.

Sarah finally broke away from Samuel and found Mama standing on the outskirts of the reunion. She gathered Mama into a tight hug and they broke down in each others' arms, their raw emotion palpable.

Samuel and Da chuckled to each other. “The hens are finally reunited.”

Ruth knew Mama missed her best friend, but she also suspected there was more to the tears. To Ruth's more mature female eye she spied a particular thread of understanding connecting them. She remembered Mama's instructions about lying to Da and Abraham in her letters and how they had to shield the family from the conditions in Russia. In this moment of naked truth, Ruth glimpsed that Sarah had been doing the same with Samuel all these years. This was a reunion where these two mothers could unload their burdens to another who understood. Ruth turned away from their tearful

embrace, unwilling to intrude upon their intimate moment.

The small Orchard Street apartment echoed with laughter and chatter that evening. Mama tried to create more room for the ten people at the table with a makeshift addition of overturned milk crates covered by sheets. Although squished together, no one seemed to mind. Mama, Ruth and Ester had spent the week cooking and in addition to the wine and challah, the table was filled with traditional favorites from home as well as a mix of new “American” treats dropped off by some of their non-Jewish well-wishing neighbors.

Amidst the happy sounds, Da pushed his chair back and stood with a raised glass. “I feel blessed to have all of us honor *Shabbat* under one roof again. Samuel and I have long said that our families are really one extended family.” He grinned and looked at all their faces around the table. “So now that Samuel's family has finally made the journey here to America, my family is also complete again. *L'chaim!*”

“*L'chaim,*” they echoed and glasses clinked.

“We don't need to take that one roof statement literally, do we?” Samuel laughed. “We are looking forward to getting a bit more space of our own.”

Da chuckled. “I suppose the same building or the one next door would work.”

He patted Samuel on the back, and the two got up to fetch more wine.

Sarah leaned over to Mama and patted her hand. As they laughed, their eyes filled up again. All through dinner they had kept looking over as if to remind themselves the other was really there.

Ruth surveyed the scene around the rest of the table. Ester sat alone taking everything in with wide eyes. She wore a blank expression, betraying no thoughts or emotions. As usual, Ruth thought. It seemed all interactions between them lately left Ruth confused and wondering. Next to Ester, Abraham's brothers played a game where they hit each other across the knuckles with their silverware.

Abraham sat next to them, savoring every movement of their laughter and noise as if memorizing every detail of their mannerisms.

He was smiling. It was the first time in the last year she'd seen his smile actually reach his eyes. She barely recognized him sitting across from her, this man who was laughing and joking with his brothers, finally carefree, lighthearted. Like the boy she had grown up with. The Abraham she played cards with in her parlor in Russia. She had thought that Abraham was lost and gone forever. But now here he was sitting across the table from her with his brothers. Had he only needed his family to bring that side of him to the surface? Could it be possible to have him behave that way with her also?

Ruth felt a weight lift from her shoulders. At least knowing Abraham was capable still of being lighthearted and happy, she could hope for a better future for them. She would find a way to bring that Abraham to the forefront again. He must have felt her gaze on him as she watched from across the table. He looked up, and meeting her eyes, offered a shy smile. She gave a coy smile back. There was still hope she decided. She felt a sudden flicker of excitement within her about their upcoming wedding dance.

An hour later Ruth stood at the sink drying dishes for Mama.

“Want to go for a walk?” Abraham whispered in her ear.

Ruth blushed. The kids were collapsed in heaps around the room, and the adults were gathered around the table with another bottle of wine. It was the perfect opportunity to escape, and she was pleased he offered. She turned around and faced him. Tilting her chin up, he brushed a stray curl away from her eyes. She took his hand and led him to the front door where he took her coat from the hook and held it out for her. She shivered, remembering their first walk together two years ago. The day he proposed. Her first day in America. That day too had held such hope and optimism. She now knew how naïve she had been. She mistakenly believed things could be perfect and a fresh start would guarantee

happiness. She briefly wondered if she was making the same mistake again, and shook the thought away. She needed to believe things could be different, that their marriage would not be doomed from the start.

Ruth looked over at Abraham as they began their descent down the four flights of stairs to the street. He appeared to be lost in thought, but met her gaze with a small smile and then cautiously reached over and took her hand in his. As they neared the second floor landing, one of the gas lamps flickered, followed by a sputter and then darkness.

Abraham cursed under his breath before squeezing Ruth's hand in reassurance.

“Here, lean on me so we can navigate together.”

“Wait, I have an idea!” She said. “We can use the sacks.”

The landlord had hung painted burlap sacks on the walls for decoration during the government-enforced updates a few years ago. She felt along the wall for the ridges between them now to help count their steps. It felt like the minutes and steps crawled by until finally her foot made contact with the flat entranceway floor. She exhaled a huge sigh as they sped through the dimly lit hall to the outside.

Abraham snickered when they stepped out to the sidewalk. “Well, hope you were planning on staying out all night. Because the real adventure will be going back up.”

She groaned and shook her head. “That landlord really is useless. Not refilling the lamps, the broken toilet on the fourth floor. How else can he keep us on our toes with surprises?”

Abraham shrugged and withdrew his hand to adjust his hat. It was a clear night with only a slight chill in the air. With darkness having already descended, most people were already home observing the Sabbath. The marketplace was deserted except for one lone pushcart. A few other couples strolled leisurely in the street enjoying the first glimpse of spring. Abraham and Ruth walked in silence for a bit before she cleared her throat.

“I know it must be overwhelming to see everyone again.”

He cracked a half-smile. “A bit. But satisfying as well. It's just amazing to see how much they've all grown.”

She nodded and chewed her lower lip. “I'm sorry Devorah isn't here.”

She knew his sister's recent decision to stay in Russia upset him.

He sighed before answering. “I understand why she chose to stay. She built a life there already. I just wish I could have seen her get married.”

“Your mother said he's a lovely man. I hope they'll be happy together.”

“God-willing,” he said.

They fell silent again, and Ruth wondered what to say next. That had been the first real conversation they'd had in months. But before she could think any further, he surprised her by speaking.

“What do you think our life would have been like if I'd stayed?”

“Our life?” she echoed.

“Well, our fathers were already negotiating our betrothal. So it stands to reason we would have been married that year.”

She thought back to the day she'd watched her parents dance in the apartment. After comparing herself to her mother, she'd imagined what her life back in Russia would have been like. But for some reason she never thought Abraham could be imagining the same thing.

“I suppose you're right,” she said slowly. “We'd have been married and probably even have a few children by now.”

He smiled at her words. “I've thought about that a lot lately. How different things between us would be if I'd just never left. If I had been there to protect you, you wouldn't have had to start working in the factory or worry about providing for everyone.”

She looked up at him again. “Are you saying things would have been different because we wouldn't have come to America or because I would have been different?”

He sighed at her question. “I don't know. I'd like to blame America for our problems. But I think it does go back to you being left behind.”

“Because I learned to take care of myself?”

She noticed they were actually speaking to each other without anger or resentment. For perhaps the first time they were being completely honest with each other.

He shivered slightly. “It's not that I mind you being able to take care of yourself.”

“Oh thank God, you don't mind,” she broke in.

He scowled and she stopped. Civil, no anger, she reminded herself.

He waited for her to speak again. When she didn't, he took a deep breath and started again.

“I'm fine with you being able to take care of yourself. In fact, I admire that. I've told you before, your strength is one of my favorite things about you.”

Surprised, she tilted her head. “Then why have you been so angry with me?”

“Because taking care of yourself is never enough for you.” His voice rose. “You need to take care of everyone around you as well.”

“I don't understand. You're angry with me for caring about others' well-being?”

Visibly frustrated, he dragged his hand through his hair. “The strike, the suffragettes. You have nothing left for the rest of us.”

She stopped walking and turned to him. “That's not true! I have always cared for you all.”

He snorted. “How exactly, Ruth? When you ignored your father asking you not to work on the Sabbath? Or when you ignored us telling you it was too painful to stand by and watch you put yourself in danger on the picket line?”

“That's not fair.” She crossed her arms. “You were all asking me to sacrifice my beliefs to

squelch your fears.”

“And after everything the family had already been through that was too much to ask? You needed to make us all worry and suffer more? Your hatred for Max Blanck, was that so much more important?”

“Well, if you want to argue that point, it was you who made us all suffer the first time around,” she shouted. “Why should I be held back because your cause got our brothers killed?”

Realizing how her statement sounded, she jumped in to recant.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.” She put her hands up as if surrendering. “What I mean is why does it always have to be a choice? Why can’t I have both, like Lucy?”

“Because our lives don’t work that way, Ruth.”

“Because you want me being a good *berryer*? Making sure dinner is ready when you get home?”

He shook his head and frowned. “No, because I can’t sit on the side watching and feeling like I don’t matter all the time.”

She reeled at his words. “I make you feel like you don’t matter?” Her voice cracked. “Of course, you matter.”

“Do I? Then why is it so hard for you to choose?”

“You’re not being fair in forcing me to! Who are you now? You never used to turn your back away from a fight. How can you just close your eyes and pretend these horrible things aren’t happening?”

He clenched his jaw and turned away. “Because I’ve chosen life, Ruth! My own. Try it.” He gestured widely around him. “The fights will never end. There are dozens of Max Blancks out there. You can’t defeat them all.”

“I have to try!” she cried. “You’ve just given up! I can’t close my eyes and pretend like you.”

“So you're just going to bring our future kids to the picket line then?” he mocked. “Teach them to write by making signs? Is that the life you see for us?”

“Of course not,” she sniffled.

“Well, what then? How do you plan to balance this life?”

She flailed her hands widely. “I don't know!”

He shook his head and whispered, “Because you know it's impossible.”

He turned and stalked away from her towards home while she stared after his fading shape as the distance between them grew.

Chapter Twelve

March 25, 1911- New York City

Ruth sighed as she ripped out another stitch. That was the fifth mistake she'd made today. She looked around from the corner of her eye to see if anyone noticed. She knew she'd be yelled at if people saw her falling behind.

Ester gave her a look. "Ruth, what's with you today? You're spending more time correcting stitches than actually completing new ones. If you don't get your head together we won't make quota."

"I'm fine. Quit fussing," Ruth snapped. She looked over her shoulder to see if anyone else heard Ester.

Heads were down focused on work. She could hear nothing from the other tables over the growl of the machines. Next to her Chayele winked.

"No one but us to hear you two pecking at each other. But whatever's going on, get it together, I've got a date picking me up exactly at five, and I don't intend to keep him waiting."

Ruth huffed trying to move a piece of hair out of her eye. The others didn't appear as if they'd be much help either. Mirele and Zusa had been in gossip mode all day discussing a problem with one of their roommates and Filomena was nursing a bad head cold. From the other end of the table she sneezed loudly and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Overall, their line was in trouble today.

Ruth bent her head back down to attempt to focus, but movement from across the room caught her attention. Max Blanck's daughters and their governess were arriving to meet him for their regular Saturday shopping trip. She scowled as the girls sauntered across the workroom with an air of entitlement wearing their pretty coats, buttoned up ankle high boots, and white muffs. Max met them at the door of the workroom and peeked in to check on the progress at the workstations. He caught Ruth's

eye and scowled at her for her idleness. She stared back defiantly until he looked away to collect the girls and bring them upstairs to the administrative offices.

Her hands shook as she shoved the shirt sleeve back into her machine. She rushed through the stitches and grabbed the next shirt sleeve from the pile. She glanced at the clock on the wall. Only thirty minutes left. Her last thirty minutes of working. Maybe that was why she was having such difficulty focusing, a part of her almost wanted to savor these last thirty minutes. By this time tomorrow she'd be married and life as she knew it would change forever. She sighed as she faced reality again and pumped her foot harder as she fed another shirt into the machine. Now if only she could somehow shave a few minutes off each sleeve remaining.

“Ouch.” She stuck her pricked finger in her mouth and sucked in the drop of blood quickly forming.

“Here, give me that,” Ester grabbed the sleeve from Ruth's hand. “Do you want us to be owing money by the end of the shift?”

“Who made you boss now?” Ruth grumbled, but she let Ester fix the sleeve for her.

From across the room Abraham caught her eye. Since his promotion to collar and union leader he'd been rewarded by being positioned next to the windows that provided welcome air to offset the hot machines. The March late afternoon sunlight reflected in from the window and highlighted the streaks of blond in his chestnut hair. A small smile played on her lips. Despite all of their issues she still found him incredibly good looking. His green shirt was rumpled though, and his face was pale with dark circles under his eyes. He must have had trouble sleeping after their fight the night before as well. He lifted his eyebrows questioningly to her. She nodded to him, and he looked back down to his machine.

“He's still mad at me.” Ruth said. “What should I do?”

Ester snorted in response. She picked up another shirt sleeve off Ruth's pile. Ruth hit her hand away.

“Focus on your own pile. I can do my own work, thanks.”

Ester dropped the shirtsleeve and held up her hands in mock surrender. Ruth looked at the diminished pile. Ester had somehow managed to knock off five shirtsleeves in two minutes. She couldn't help but marvel. Her younger sister had found her calling. She took one last suck at her finger and then fed another shirtsleeve into the machine.

“So you didn't answer me. What should I do about Abraham?”

Ester hesitated and shrugged as she fed another shirtsleeve into her machine. She looked away from Ruth's expectant gaze.

“I don't know what you expect. You pushed us all away for the past year doing exactly what you wanted. You had to have known it was taking a toll on him.”

“But I wasn't doing it for me. I was doing it for you and the girls here at the factory. For a better future.”

Ester cut in, “We don't care about your intentions. It can't always be your fight. And you continuing to fight just hurts the people around you. When will you just learn to let go?”

“Well, I'm letting go to be his wife. He should know he's my priority now.” Ruth sighed again and shoved a sweaty curl out of her face. She reached for another shirtsleeve, but Ester caught her hand.

“Because you want him to be, or because he has to be?”

As Ruth opened her mouth to answer, screams erupted from the kindergarten corner behind them. Licks of flames spilled from the air shaft. Tendrils of smoke climbed the walls and were soon overpowering the room. Panic erupted as girls leapt from their seats, shrieking. Ruth stood frozen staring at the dancing flames. Ester grabbed Ruth's arm and roughly pulled her from her seat.

The rows of machines took up the majority of the room leaving just the center and end aisles to handle the onslaught of traffic. But the girls could only fit in the aisles two across at a time. Panicking,

girls tried to scramble over the tops of the machines while others tried to crawl underneath. Skirts caught on the heavy parts, and the trapped girls cried out in terror as the flames leapt closer.

Ester pulled Ruth into the single file line of girls edging towards the right aisle. Ruth looked over her shoulder to see Chayele leading the other girls close behind. Chayele waved Ruth on. Ruth turned back to Ester, and they elbowed their way through and into the aisle leading to the Greene Street staircase. This was the usual exit they departed through each day for purse checks. Being the closest and most obvious exit there was a backup of almost a hundred people all going in a single file line down the staircase.

“Come on! Let's try the Washington Street exit.” Ester yanked Ruth away, and they hiked up their skirts and climbed atop the machines. Ruth craned her neck trying to look over the heads of the crowd to see Abraham.

“Do you see him?” Ruth breathed.

“No,” Ester chewed her lip. “I'm sure he's already on his way out.”

They jumped across the tops of the machines until they reached the end of the row and landed in the middle of the aisle on the left side of the room now.

“We'll find him, don't worry,” Ester squeezed Ruth's hand and steered her towards the Washington Street staircase.

The crowd surged as one ahead. They were a few feet away from the exit when they heard shouts ahead, and everyone came to an abrupt stop.

“It's locked, damn it!” one of the men yelled. “Where is the weasel?”

They slammed the door with their fists and chants began demanding the key. People stood on tip toe and looked over the crowd, but there was no sign of the foreman.

“The coward took off already!” a woman yelled.

The room grew hotter by the second. The scrap heaps had ignited in seconds as had the piles on

the work stations. Wooden tables by the air shaft were charred black and some of the metal machines in the back were buckling from the heat. Ruth's chest tightened, and her eyes watered from the smoke. She covered her mouth with her sleeve.

“The elevator,” she wheezed to Ester.

Ester nodded, and they turned to push against the crowd. Glass broke in the distance. Ruth vaguely remembered Blanck bragging to Abraham about the new state of the art fire safety precautions they'd installed. Some of the men must be trying to put the fire out. A bucket went flying over their heads and hit the wall.

“The hose is empty!” a man cursed.

The pushing and shoving grew even rougher. A thickening blanket of smoke settled over the room. Ruth clutched Ester's hand, drawing blood with her fingernails as they rode the tidal wave of bodies pushing towards the elevators. She cringed as she heard people screaming as they fell underfoot and got trampled. She felt her own feet step on the soft cushion of body parts, but she was trapped in the surge and couldn't break away or stop. The elevator doors towered like a beacon ahead. The last chance for escape. She heard the faint ding as Joseph's elevator arrived and the doors opened. The crowd pushed forward, and she was thrown into the car still clutching Ester's hand.

“Stop! Stop! There's too many!” Joseph screamed. “The elevator can't hold everyone.”

People's panicked fists flew as they fought for a spot. The elevator swayed from the weight. The crowd ebbed and flowed like violent waves crashing and tearing away from shore as people continued to shove meeting equal force by the elevator passengers pushing back.

“Hold on everyone. We have to go!” Joseph yelled. “Gaspar will be right back for another trip. Step back!” He pulled on the chain link elevator door and passengers in the car grabbed hold to help him. From the other side panicked people tried to pull the other way. Just as the door was about to close, Ester suddenly released Ruth's hand and shimmied through the half inch of space and off the car.

“What are you doing?” Ruth screamed.

“I’m sorry, Ruth!” Ester sobbed. “I’m sorry!”

The elevator door closed and Joseph slammed the lever down. The elevator jerked and dropped downwards.

“No!” Ruth slammed the chain link door with her fists. The chain rattled and clanked as she clawed at the cage door and tried to rip it open.

“We have to go back,” she begged. “We have to go back!”

Someone slammed her from behind and her knees buckled. But she continued pulling at the door.

“Stop her! She’ll get us all killed.”

Joseph grabbed her and dragged her away from the door. She collapsed against his chest as he wiped her now bloody fingers with his shirt.

“I’ll go back,” he soothed. “I’ll get them, I promise.”

Suddenly, there was a cracking noise. Joseph pushed her into the corner and returned to the controls. Another crack sounded followed by screams.

“Is that the other elevator?” A woman gulped.

A second later thumps thundered overhead. The roof dented and plaster cracked from the ceiling. Dust flew down as the muffled bangs continued against the top of the car and the elevator swayed unsteadily. A pervading smell of smoke and singed flesh invaded the car. Gasping, the passengers huddled together and Ruth heard a few of the girls choke back sobs behind her.

Despite the fear surrounding her, all she could do was stare ahead at the soot smeared fingerprints on the elevator wall. More and more thumps came. The elevator creaked and groaned and then a snapping noise and they began to fall. Limbs and elbows crashed together as they all clutched anything they could grab. Free-falling they flew through the air before landing with a jolting crash to

the floor. Stacked on each other in heaps, they lay there for a moment while overhead the thumps continued.

Joseph pulled himself up against the soot stained wall and limped to the elevator doors. He pulled the chain link door open while some of the other passengers helped. Ruth teetered to her feet. Blood trickled down the front of the doors and a hand tumbled over the top of the car. She gasped as understanding dawned. The thumps overhead had been people jumping. The crowd surged forward again carrying Ruth along to the front doors of the building.

The cacophony of noise in the street swarmed around her as the crowd emptied onto the sidewalk. Screams pierced the air. Fire engine bells rang and fire fighters barked directions as they ran to and fro assessing the situation. The fire fighters discovered upon arrival they didn't have ladders that reached the fire. Their ladders only reached the sixth floor. Fire fighters scurried helplessly battling a hopeless fight with the blaze while others cleared bodies off the street.

Onlookers surrounded the building with an indistinct buzz of pointing and speaking in hushed tones. Blood pooled around Ruth's feet and the smell of charred flesh was suffocating. She finally forced herself to look down at the sidewalk. Bodies lay in awkward angles from where they had fallen from the sky. As she watched another body fell inches from where she stood.

A battle waged within her. She couldn't bring herself to look at the faces of the bodies lying on the sidewalk, yet at the same time she had to find them. She forced her feet to move and picked her way across the mass grave site. Coins and personal effects were strewn across the street from the pockets of the falling victims. Scavengers were already running through gathering all they could. Some faces were unrecognizable from their crash on the hard pavement or from a momentary pause before jumping that caused them to catch fire.

Tears ran down Ruth's face as she recognized the gold crucifix necklace Filomena always wore around one of the bloodied bodies' necks. She knelt and picked up Yankel's metal flask inches from his

broken body that lay at an unnatural angle. As if in a fog, she ran her fingers along the edge of Yankel's flask. How many times had she seen Yankel and Abraham pass it back and forth between them while they stood in the cold on the picket line? Momentary relief washed over her as she realized she didn't see Ester or Abraham anywhere on the sidewalk. It soon dissipated though as she realized she also didn't see them standing on the outside street corner either. She forced herself to look back up at the burning building.

A girl stood in one of the windows on the ninth floor. Ruth recognized her as the girl from the kindergarten corner she caught with the foreman. The girl gazed down at the street below and caught eyes with Ruth. They stood there, gazes locked for a moment. A flicker of panic overtook her features and then the girl screamed as she launched herself, skirt blazing into the air. Moments later Ruth watched as she hit the ground with a sickening thud. Ruth cringed and tried to take a deep breath, despite the tightening in her chest.

Then a flutter of movement and a familiar flash of green caught her eye from above. There he stood in the ninth floor window. The same rumpled green shirt and chestnut brown hair she'd been admiring a half hour earlier catching the light.

“No!” Ruth's arms reached up towards the window. “Abraham, don't!”

There was more movement, and she watched with horror as Ester joined Abraham in the window. With his hand he reached up and tenderly stroked Ester's cheek. Ruth shook her head in confusion as he then leaned in and kissed Ester on the lips. They broke apart and laced their fingers together and then leapt holding hands into the air.

“No!” Ruth sobbed as she collapsed to the sidewalk. She watched unable to look away as her sister and fiance' landed together in a heap on the sidewalk.

Chapter Thirteen

March 1911- New York City

Hundreds of people gathered outside the covered pier on Twenty-Sixth Street. The pier was being used as a claiming place for all of the bodies from the fire. Entire families stood passing around handkerchiefs. Others brought neighbors and family friends. A breeze blowing from the river sent a chill up Ruth's spine as she waited with her parents. Police officers pushed their way through the crowds trying to create some semblance of order.

The line finally began moving forward, and they shuffled slowly into the pier. Inside by the entrance, they were greeted by another police officer who directed them to walk up and down the rows of bodies until they could make an identification.

“There's one hundred and forty-six here. Take your time, folks. Some identifications will be harder to make than others depending on the condition of the bodies.”

Ruth gagged and choked back bile as she looked down at the victims. The smell of burned flesh engulfed her. All around her people covered their faces with handkerchiefs and rags, while sobbing and gagging. A few poor souls vomited in the corner.

Mama suddenly dropped her hand and sprinted away to the corner. She looked over at Da, but he only shrugged helplessly. Taking a deep breath, Ruth squelched down her own horror to run after Mama.

She leaned over Mama's hunched form and patted her on the back.

She turned away as Mama gagged again. Waves of nausea threatened Ruth, but she pinched her nose and forced herself to ignore them. Finally, Mama straightened and wiped her mouth. She stood there for a moment before nodding to Ruth.

“I'm ready.”

They rejoined Da in the line. Mama clutched Ruth's hand in a vise-like grip, but Ruth didn't dare try to break it. She glanced down at the bodies surrounding them. Some she recognized immediately. Girls from the table across from her. Jacob who worked on the cutter's table with Abraham. And Mrs. Rossetti, the secretary from the 9th floor office, who always had homemade treats on her desk for the girls.

The victims who jumped were mostly recognizable, aside from their broken bones. The ones who paused a moment too long before jumping now had burned portions of their bodies or faces. Ruth remembered locking eyes with that girl from the kindergarten corner, watching her startled face as she burst into flames and jumped into the air still burning. She shook her head and looked down at her feet trying to dislodge the image.

The line meandered slowly through the rows. People stopped to identify their loved ones, then nurses would tag the victim's foot and write down the name. The line also stopped as people paused over badly burned bodies of the victims who had been trapped inside the burning building. The families gasped and sobbed as they tried to make an identification based on clothing or jewelry.

Ruth found Chayele standing over one of those bodies. Yankel. His body was charred beyond recognition, with patches of hair and burned skin clinging to the left side of his skull. But sticking out the left pocket of his partially burned pants was his flask. It was the only thing that identified him. Ruth whispered a quick prayer of thanks that she'd remembered to return the flask to the spot she'd found it in the midst of the chaos the day before. She caught Da's eye. He nodded and grabbed Mama's hand so Ruth could join Chayele. She put her hand on Chayele's shoulder and patted it gently.

Chayele's voice seemed to come from far away. “He was all I had left. And now he's gone too.”

Ruth could think of nothing to say. They stood in silence and watched as the nurse wrapped the tag around Yankel's foot and added his name.

Ruth guided Chayele back into the line where they joined her parents in the procession moving forward. As they made their way down the fifth row, Da finally stopped and pointed. Ruth closed her eyes as her teeth began to chatter. This was it. She'd no longer be able to pretend. She hadn't been able to tell the family about Ester and Abraham. Their deaths were shock enough. Their intimacy in that moment should remain private. Now that secret would be exposed.

But when she forced herself to open her eyes and look towards where Da pointed, she saw their hands were no longer joined. They now just lay side by side in the row. Ruth heaved an involuntary sigh of relief as Da formally identified them and the tags were added.

“It looks like they didn't suffer too much,” Chayele whispered.

Not physically, Ruth thought. Though emotionally she wasn't sure. She wondered if someday she'd be able to forgive them. But as she looked down at their bodies now, all she could feel was rage. Rage tinged with loss. How would she ever be able to forgive them if she could never even hear their side of the story?

She gritted her teeth and pushed her anger away as the four of them forced themselves to leave Ester and Abraham's bodies. She was distracted a moment later by a large family a few spaces ahead of them surrounding one of the bodies. An elderly woman was crying and being held up by a younger man. Two other women were burying their faces in each others' shoulders.

“That's Filomena's family,” Chayele said.

“Should we speak to them?”

Chayele shook her head, her chin trembling.

“Ruth?” Da tugged on her arm. “If we're done here, I'm going to get your mother outside.”

“Ya. There's nothing left here.”

“Wait,” Chayele pulled her back. “Zusa and Mirele. They have no family to claim them.”

“Are we sure they didn't make it out?” Ruth asked.

“I haven't heard from them, have you?” Chayele looked over her shoulder at the line of people in the rows.

“We'll wait for you outside,” Da said.

Chayele clutched onto her arm again and pulled her through that row and into the next. Whispers made their way back through the line that the last two rows of victims were found in the elevator shafts. Ruth trembled. The sound of the thumps on the roof of the car while they fell still echoed in her head. Chayele shook her arm to get her attention.

“Look, it's Mirele.”

Mirele's neck was positioned in an unnatural angle, and her face and arms were shaded with dark bruises. But she was recognizable. Ruth nodded and the nurse tagged Mirele's foot.

They continued to shuffle along with the line through to the last row of bodies. But there was no sign of Zusa. As they got to the exit the police officer standing there saw Chayele's panicked face.

“Come back tomorrow. The claimed bodies will be gone. It will be easier to sift through the last of the unclaimed victims.”

Chayele blinked back tears and nodded.

“Thank you, we'll do that,” Ruth said.

She squeezed Chayele's hand and steered her into the cool afternoon air. The crowd had greatly reduced since they'd entered the pier earlier. In comparison, the street now felt almost barren. The glum mood from inside seemed to permeate into the usually bustling city street.

Ruth spotted Da and Mama waiting across the street. Mama was sitting on the curb with her head between her legs. Ruth hurried over to her mother's side.

“We need to get her home,” Da said helping her to her feet. “Did you find your friends?”

“One of them,” Ruth said. “We need to come back tomorrow to look for the other.”

Da nodded and turned to Chayele. “I understand you're alone in this city now.”

Chayele stared at the ground and nodded.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "You can come stay with us then. No one should ever feel completely alone."

Chayele looked up and met his eyes. "Thank you, sir."

He nodded stiffly and turned back to Mama. "Come along then. It's been a long day."

Chayele tucked her hand in Ruth's arm, and the two hurried to keep up with Mama and Da.

Hours later, during the dark night, Ruth sat in the chair by the parlor window staring out to the sleepy city street. Chayele woke behind her on the couch and murmured sleepily, "Can't sleep? What time is it anyway?"

"I don't know. I've been up for awhile."

Chayele yawned. "Are you having flashbacks again?"

"I keep picturing them together," Ruth whispered.

Chayele crossed the room and put a hand on Ruth's shoulder. "I know. I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what that must have been like. Helplessly having to watch them."

Ruth turned in the chair to face Chayele. "No, you don't understand. I saw them together. They were together, Chayele."

Chayele tilted her head before reaching for Ruth's hand. She was about to open her mouth to say something, when Ruth jumped in again.

"I saw them kissing. They kissed and then jumped together holding hands."

She turned away to face the window again as Chayele slid down to her knees on the floor next to the chair. Still clutching Ruth's hand, Chayele squeezed it tightly between her own.

"You must be mistaken."

Ruth shook her head and looked down to her lap. "I wish."

They sat in silence holding hands for a moment. Each stared out to space lost in thought.

Finally, Chayele cleared her throat.

“They had to be just caught up in the moment. The fear, the adrenaline. They were seeking comfort.”

Ruth shook her head as Chayele spoke. “I don't think so. They were so intimate. I feel like it was more.” She turned to look at Chayele again. “I think I'm responsible. I pushed them together, Chayele.”

Chayele pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. “How? How could you possibly be responsible for your fiance' and your sister betraying you?”

Ruth sighed. “By not listening to them. By ignoring their wishes when it came to my involvement with the strike and the suffragettes. They kept telling me I was pushing them away. I just didn't realize how much I was pushing them towards each other.” She plucked at the hem of her nightgown in her lap. “He just wanted to be needed. He even mentioned a few times how nice it was that Ester did need him. I almost wonder if that was his way of telling me. Warning me somehow.”

Chayele readjusted herself on the floor so her back could lean against the wall. “Do you think he was that conscious of it? That he could identify his motivations that clearly? I doubt it was that simple if it even was going on as long as you suspect. Abraham was an honorable man, Ruth. And whether he was confused or not, he did care for you. And Ester was your sister...” She shook her head as if forming a conclusion. “No, I don't believe it. Even if they might have had feelings for each other I refuse to believe they acted on them before that moment.”

Ruth didn't answer. They sat in silence again for awhile. Ruth stared out the window as the sun began to peek its head out in the distance from behind the corners of buildings. Chayele fiddled with the edge of her shawl, twirling it round and round her finger. Finally, Ruth's voice trembled as it broke the silence.

“Do you know what the worst part is?”

Chayele got to her knees and looked up.

“I want to be angry I really do. And a part of me definitely is. But another part wonders if maybe they should have been together. She obviously loved him in a way I never did.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Chayele asked leaning towards her.

“She jumped back out of the elevator, Chayele. She ran back into the burning building to be with him! All I thought of was getting myself out.”

“Oh, Ruth,” Chayele grabbed Ruth's hand. “That doesn't mean you loved him any less. It just means you had survival instincts. You preserved yourself first. That's natural.”

“For me apparently. That's what they both complained about me doing all the time.” Ruth sniffled. “But it wasn't for Ester. She jumped right out of that elevator and ran against the crowd back into the flames.”

“I don't think that is necessarily natural. I can't think of many people who would have done that, so you can't compare yourself to her. No one can predict how someone will react in a situation like that.” Chayele turned her head away from Ruth to stare at the wall. “I didn't think of anyone else that day. I just ran. I didn't look back at all. Does that call into question my love for my brother or friends? Maybe. All I can say is as much as I grieve for Yankel, Zusa and Mirele right now, I'm still glad I made it out alive.”

Ruth nodded and turned back to the window. Chayele climbed into the chair next to her and wrapped her arms around Ruth. Ruth leaned her head on Chayele's shoulder and said nothing else as they watched the sunrise fill the sky in the distance.

Chapter Fourteen

New York City- December 1911

Ruth woke the morning of the trial to find the ground blanketed with a half-foot of snow and the air so cold in the apartment she could see her breath. She threw her feet over the side of the cot and wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders. It was strange sleeping on the cot in the kitchen. As if she was stomping on Abraham's memory somehow by using it. The apartment just felt wrong. Empty and lifeless. She still half expected the front door to open with Ester and Abraham walking in laughing over something funny that happened at the market. She turned her attention to stoking the fire to heat up the iron.

Laying out her shirtwaist and skirt on the ironing board, she went over them three times to make sure they were completely wrinkle-free. They were both black as her attorney, Mr. Bostwick, instructed. The color of mourning. But she didn't need the color to remind her of all she'd lost.

It was nine months later and still every time she closed her eyes she could only see the image of Abraham cupping Ester's face and kissing her. Chayele and Lucy told her the best way for her to work towards forgiving them and herself was to make their deaths mean something. For that reason, she agreed to testify against Blanck and Harris in the trial today. She firmly believed they were stuck on the hook this time; there was no way they'd be walking away from this. Not even their deep pockets could buy them out of being responsible for the deaths of one hundred and forty-six people.

Finishing with the iron, she dressed with care, taking time to smooth and arrange every fold of her outfit carefully. Remembering all of her lessons from Zusa, she then pinned each delicate curl until they cascaded like a waterfall down her head. Finally satisfied with her appearance, she said goodbye to her mother and left for the courthouse. She shook her head as she walked down the stairs to the

street. She'd begged her parents to come to the trial last night, but they'd steadfastly refused.

“You should know by now, we can't dwell on the past. What does it matter who's to blame?” Da settled down to the table with his copy of the Torah. “That won't help Ester and Abraham find peace. All we can do is pray for them.”

Mama had remained silent, but it was obvious she agreed. At least they hadn't fought her about her part in the trial.

Lucy's car was waiting for Ruth by the curb out front. Chayele was already inside.

“Ready?” Chayele patted her on the arm as she slid into the back seat.

Ruth nodded. “My stomach feels like it's flipping over.”

“That's to be expected,” Lucy squeezed her knee. “Just remember Mr. Bostwick's instructions and you'll be fine.”

They drove the rest of the way to the courthouse in silence. Ruth stared out the window at the piles of snow lining the street and the men working in the streets ahead of them with shovels to clear the way. She hoped the weather would not impact the trial in any way. She couldn't imagine waiting any longer.

They walked inside to find a mob waiting by the elevators in the hallway.

“They're waiting to see Blanck and Harris,” Chayele whispered.

The judge had limited attendance inside the courtroom to people pertinent to the trial. Although his intentions were well meaning in light of the negative publicity surrounding the trial, it appeared he had not considered the issue of people crowding outside the courtroom. Ruth, Chayele and Lucy stood on the perimeter as the elevator doors opened and the people surrounded Blanck and Harris and their lawyer, Max Steur. Hissing and booing, the crowd reached for the defendants' clothing and called them murderers. Some stuck photographs of dead victims from the fire in the defendants' faces. For the first time ever, Ruth actually saw a crack in Blanck's ice-cold facade. The crowd was getting to him, but

whether it was guilt he felt, she couldn't determine. But she could see he was feeling fear. That much was apparent. Good, she thought, it's about time he felt afraid.

Lucy grabbed Ruth's elbow. "Let's find a seat before they're all taken. Better to get away from the hostile environment so you can conquer your nerves."

Ruth tightened her coat and burrowed in it deeper as they walked. Although indoors, it was as cold inside as the wintry day outside. The care she took preparing her outfit might be for nothing if the room never warmed.

Blanck and Harris were already sitting up front whispering with their lawyer as Ruth found a seat with Lucy and Chayele. They had hired the fanciest lawyer in New York City. Max Steur had his hand in every big case in the news. Nicknamed "Million Dollar Steur," he was known for his photographic memory and special brand of ruthlessness and charm while questioning witnesses. The prosecutor, Bostwick, had warned Ruth about him and now seeing him in person, she was even more nervous about being under his scrutiny on the stand. Short and stocky, he wore a no-nonsense expression and reminded her of an alert fox taking in every detail of the room.

Her musings were interrupted as the court was called to order. She jumped to her feet as Judge Thomas Crain swept in to his seat with an evasive glance over the room that met no one's eyes. Moments later, Bostwick tugged at his bushy mustache and launched into his opening statement.

"Gentlemen of the jury, locking a factory door during working hours is a misdemeanor, and a misdemeanor that leads to death is considered felony manslaughter. I set out to prove today that Isaac Harris and Max Blanck knowingly ordered an exit door to be locked on the day of the fire. And in doing so they are responsible for the deaths of one hundred and forty-six people..."

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“Now Miss Feldman, could you please tell us what you were doing when the fire began that day?” Mr. Bostwick stroked his mustache and paced before her.

Ruth twisted her handkerchief in her lap. “I was finishing up my work for the day at my sewing station with my sister and friends.”

“Uhm, Your Honor, I have to object.” Mr. Steur stood to his feet. “Not all of the jury members speak Yiddish and will be able to follow Miss Feldman's statement.”

Ruth blushed. Mr. Bostwick had warned her of this, but in her nervousness she had lapsed into her comfortable native tongue.

“I have translators available, Your Honor.” Mr. Bostwick said winking at Ruth.

Steur jumped to his feet again. “I have to object to that as well, Your Honor. How could the jury be sure nothing is being lost in translation?”

Judge Crain cleared his throat. “I have to agree. Only English may be spoken in testimony if witnesses are capable.”

Heat rose to Ruth's face. She now had them questioning if she was capable of speaking in English. Her pride wounded, she gave a small nod before repeating her earlier statement in English.

“Was there any warning before you saw the fire erupting from the air shaft behind you?” Bostwick asked.

“No sir. There was no warning. We just saw the flames coming towards us and taking over the floor. We ran as best we could, but were blocked in by the tables and machines. So we pushed into line in the aisles and made our way to the doors. But when we got to the Washington Place stairs, the door was locked.”

“Locked, you say? Had you ever used this door before that day?” Bostwick asked.

“No sir, we were always expected to leave through the Greene Street door so our bags could be searched.”

“Then why did you try to leave by the Washington Place door that day?”

“It was closer, sir. And there was already a huge crowd of girls by the Greene Street doors.”

“So what happened when you found the Washington Place door locked?”

“The crowd starting screaming for Mr. Alter, the foreman, to bring the key. But he never came. He'd already escaped.”

He offered her a reassuring smile and nodded. “So then what happened?”

“The room was swirling with smoke by that point. It was burning my chest. My sister, Ester, dragged me to the elevators, and we pushed our way onto the last one. But we got separated at the last minute, and she didn't make it into the car.” Ruth's voice cracked, and she took a deep breath before continuing. “I screamed for her, but the operator, Joseph Zito, said we couldn't go back. So the elevator went down, but we heard thumps on the ceiling and the plaster started cracking and falling down on us in the car. Then we heard screams and ripping noises before the elevator started to fall. We crashed down the shaft to the bottom. All of us in the car got out, but the elevator couldn't go up for any more trips.”

“Now take a moment Miss Feldman, I understand this is difficult for you. But what did you see when you got outside to the street?”

“I saw...” Tears erupted and she struggled to take in a calming breath. “I saw my sister and fiance' standing trapped in the window of the ninth floor. When the fire closed in on them, they both jumped and crashed to the ground in front of me.”

She looked down at her lap unable to meet Mr. Bostwick's eyes.

“Miss Feldman, in addition to you sister and fiance', how many people did you see jump from the windows?”

“Too many, I didn't count,” Ruth stuttered.

“As many as ten possibly?” Bostwick gently pushed.

“Yes,” she sighed. “More than ten.”

“More than twenty?”

“Yes.”

“Thirty perhaps?” he continued.

“Your Honor, I object to this!” Steur jumped to his feet. “May I approach the bench, please?”

Ruth dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief as the two lawyers approached the judge.

She heard whispered bits of their argument. Steur mentioned something about a bias against his client, and Bostwick said something about it being emotionally vital to the case. Finally, Judge Crain sent them both back to their seats.

“I’m ready with my ruling. From this point forward there will be no mention of events occurring after the outbreak of the fire. Only events leading up to and during the actual outbreak may be discussed. There will be no mention of escapes or actual witnessing of deaths.”

From the corner of her eye, Ruth saw Chayele drop her head into her hands and Lucy put an arm around her shoulders. How could the judge do this? How would his ruling impact the case?

“As you wish, Your Honor.” Bostwick bowed. He chewed his lip as he considered his next move. Finally, he looked up and met Ruth’s eyes again. “Thank you Miss Feldman. That will be all.”

She looked over at Steur expecting him to jump up and interrogate her now, but instead he met her gaze with a sly smile and said she had already answered all his questions. She stood with shaky legs and somehow managed to return to her seat next to Lucy and Chayele without stumbling. She’d expected the butterflies to be mellowing now that her testimony was done, but instead they now felt like they’d morphed into bats or birds trapped in her stomach flapping around in there.

“Don’t worry, dear. Mr. Bostwick will find some way to redirect his efforts,” Lucy smiled. Ruth nodded and tried to convince herself to remain confident.

A few moments later Blanck was called to the stand. Ruth sent him an icy glare as he rose from

his seat and walked to the stand. He never looked her way. She sighed and then rubbed her hands together as he took his oath and settled into his seat. This was it. Time for Bostwick to expose him for what he really was.

“So Mr. Blanck, could you please tell the court what you were doing when the fire began?” Steur asked.

“I was standing in the shipping department on the tenth floor. Somebody called out that my taxi had arrived. You see, it was Saturday, and I was supposed to be taking my girls shopping that afternoon. I'd left them in my office with their governess, so I started heading in that direction to get the girls and my coat when I saw someone running through the hallway yelling that there was a fire on the eighth floor. I ran towards the Greene Street door to check on the situation, but I remembered my girls. I was afraid they'd be frightened, so I turned back for them. I grabbed the girls from my office and headed for the elevator instead. But when I got there all the pressers were stampeding towards the elevator and yelling, 'Save us! Save us!'. So I loaded all the pressers into the elevator and told the operator to take them all down and come straight back.”

He paused to take a big breath and glanced around the courtroom.

“What happened after that, sir?” Steur pressed.

“I sat there waiting for the elevator to return, but it felt like it was taking forever. And at that point, with my girls holding both my hands, all I could think was I didn't have any minutes to spare. So I ran to the other side and opened the Washington Place door.”

“And that door opened? Meaning it was unlocked?” Steur asked.

“Oh yes, it opened right away.”

“And you were not holding a key?” Steur turned to look at the jury.

Blanck looked to the jury as well. “No, I did not have a key with me. It was unlocked.”

“So then what happened?”

“I meant to run downstairs, but when I looked down the stairs all I could see was smoke. I knew the children wouldn't be able to stand it. From somewhere behind me I heard Isaac yelling that we had to run up to the roof. I looked back at the smoky stairwell again and knew that way was our only option. So I grabbed my two girls by the hand and we ran up to the roof.”

“Opened right up, what a load of hooey,” Chayele muttered.

Ruth rolled her eyes in response, “And the Father of the Year act?”

Bostwick did his best to poke holes in Blanck's story, but the jury members' faces remained impassive.

Lucy leaned over and gestured to the jury as Blanck left the stand. “Tough bunch.”

Ruth bit her lip and ignored her. They still had Harris to question. It wasn't over yet. She leaned forward as Steur approached Harris to begin.

“Mr. Harris, how long have you and Mr. Blanck been business partners?” Steur asked.

“Twelve years, sir. His wife, Bertha, is my cousin.” Harris smiled.

“A family business then, how nice. And what was your responsibility in the business?”

“I was mainly the designer. I came up with the product designs and looked after everything on the floors.”

Steur clasped his hands behind his back and walked towards the jury box. “So you were on the floor for most the day?”

“Yes, sir. I spent most the day traveling from floor to floor. I divided my time between the three floors.”

“And how did you get from floor to floor? The elevator?”

“Oh no, sir,” Harris shook his head. “It was much faster to take the stairs.”

“And which staircase did you take? The Greene Street stairs or the Washington Place?” Steur asked.

“Both sir. Whichever one was closer depending on which side of the building I was on at the time.”

“And did you carry a key with you during your travels?”

“No, my key was left in my office. Both staircase doors were always unlocked.”

“If you didn't carry a key, who was in charge of locking up each day?” Steur asked.

“The foreman, Mr. Alter, sir. He opened each day and locked up each night along with two other watchmen.”

“Thank you, Mr. Harris. That is all.” Steur smiled and sat down.

Bostwick jumped to his feet.

“Now, Mr. Harris, there have been witnesses who have said they'd seen you and Mr. Blanck standing by the door on the Greene Street side on the ninth floor watching the girls get their bags inspected on their way out. What do you say to these allegations?”

Harris pulled on his collar. “That is untrue. I've never done that.”

Chayele snorted. “I thought they couldn't tell an outright lie on the stand.”

Lucy shushed her and patted her on the arm.

“But you knew it was done?” Bostwick leaned on the witness stand towards him.

“Yes, I knew there were inspections.”

Bostwick pushed away from the stand and pointed at him. “By your orders.”

“Yes sir, by my orders. But I personally was never there.”

Bostwick nodded and turned away from Harris towards the jury box. “In your twelve years as partners, did you ever suffer from any other fires, Mr. Harris?”

“Yes,” Harris said slowly. “But that's normal in any large factory, Mr. Bostwick.”

“Possibly, but are you aware that there's some coincidental timing in all of your fires, Mr. Harris?” Bostwick turned back towards the papers on his table.

Harris frowned. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, let's start with how many other fires do you recollect there being, Mr. Harris?"

Harris shifted his weight in his seat and looked down towards his lap. "Two, I believe."

"Two that were reported to insurance you mean, Mr. Harris," Bostwick opened the file he was holding. "As far as I can tell from employee testimony, there have actually been at least four fires total."

"Two of them were nothing more than mere waste basket fires, sir. They were put out almost immediately."

"Yes, but isn't it interesting that all four of these fires coincided with the end of your busy seasons when you had excess inventory that was all conveniently insured?" Bostwick snapped the file closed and leaned in towards Harris so they were face to face. "So what was the game here? You couldn't sell the leftover products so you'd make the money back by setting a fire and collecting a nice insurance check?"

Ruth gasped. Was Bostwick suggesting they set the fire on purpose?

Steur jumped to his feet. "Objection, Your Honor!"

Bostwick pushed away from where he was leaning and held up his hands in surrender.

"Withdrawn, Your Honor."

But as he walked back to his table to replace the file, there was a small smile on his face.

"That can't be true can it? They wouldn't really have set the fire on purpose with all of us in the building?" Ruth whispered to Chaye.

Chaye shrugged. "I doubt it since they were in the building too. Especially with Blanck's kids there. But it's a seed of doubt, and that's all we need for the jury."

Ruth nodded and fell into deep thought while she twirled a curly lock of hair.

The trial continued for days with testimony from hundreds of witnesses. All gave conflicting

reports on the status of the locked door. Steur, with his incredible memory, was quick to leap on witnesses for either changing their facts or for even repeating them too perfectly.

“Are you sure you've never told this story before?” he berated one girl.

“No, sir. This is the first time.”

“Tell me it again, just as you told it before.”

Nervously, the girl fumbled through the story again. It became obvious as he walked her through the story four times on the stand that she was repeating key phrases. What was probably a rehearsed speech in her mirror at home before testifying was now looking like a coached statement.

He turned around and slammed the railing in front of the jury box. “Do you see, gentlemen? The similarities in her story? How do we know this alleged story of a locked door has not just been made up and rehearsed in meetings with union leaders?”

He swirled back around to the shaking girl on the stand. “Isn't it true that you received a letter in October to appear at a meeting with the lawyer for the Ladies' Waist and Dressmakers' Union?”

“No, sir,” the girl's voice trembled.

“Are you sure you didn't meet with the lawyer to go over your story?”

The girl's eyes glistened. “No, sir, I swear.”

He turned and let it go, but Ruth could tell the jury was considering the idea.

At last, the lawyers were reciting their closing statements. Steur reiterated that the owners had no knowledge of a locked door and even so, it was not the door that prevented the workers from leaving the building, but a smoky, impassable inferno in the stairwell itself.

Bostwick reiterated that the owners were aware of the locked door and that there had been multiple witnesses who testified to finding a locked door when trying to escape and others who had seen a nail over the door with a key sometimes hanging on each floor. Why would there need to be a key present if the door was left unlocked? He reminded the jury that one hundred and forty six people

died that day, and the owners needed to be held accountable for their part in the actions that caused those deaths.

After he sat down, the courtroom remained silent for a few moments waiting. Judge Crain finally cleared his throat.

“This has been a difficult case, dealing with an extremely emotional ordeal. Gentlemen of the jury, I do not envy you your responsibility here. But before you enter deliberation, I need to remind you that the letter of the law dictates that you only consider the actual charges at hand. You cannot consider emotions, or past allegations.” He folded his hands in front of them and took a deep breath. “So in this particular case, because they are charged with a felony, I charge you that before you find these defendants guilty of manslaughter in the first degree, you must find that the door was in fact locked. If it was locked, it must have been locked with the defendants' knowledge. You must also decide without a reasonable doubt that such locking caused the deaths of the victims in the fire. If you cannot make a direct correlation between these two events, you cannot find the defendants guilty. We await your verdict.”

The jury filed out to the deliberation room as the courtroom erupted into discussions.

“What do you think? They have to declare them guilty, right?” Ruth asked.

Lucy shook her head. “I'm not sure. Steur has the jury eating out of his hand.”

Ruth shook her head. “No, no. They have to convict them. There's no way they can get away with this.”

Chayele squeezed Ruth's hand. “Deep breaths, Ruth. We're just going to have to wait and see.

Two and a half hours later, the jury filed in to a silent courtroom.

Judge Crain rested his chin on his hands. “Have you come to a verdict?”

The foreman got to his feet, “Yes, Your Honor, we have. In response to the charges of misdemeanor and manslaughter, we the jury find the defendants, not guilty.”

Judge Crain gestured to the guards to escort the jury out the back door as people in the galley jumped to their feet shouting. They moved towards Blanck and Harris. Judge Crain jumped to his feet and called for other guards to escort the defendants to his office for protection.

Lucy and Chayele argued for retaliation while Ruth sat silently in the midst of the chaos. How was this possible? After all the sacrifices and time she'd committed, Blanck and Harris were walking home free. It was all for nothing.

“Ruth?” Chayele stood with her hands on her hips. “Have you heard a word Lucy said? We need to head down to headquarters for an emergency regrouping. If we start now, we can get a petition out by Monday.”

Ruth looked outside at the fading sun and suddenly everything felt crystal clear. She gathered her belongings and got to her feet. Turning to face Chayele and Lucy, she frowned.

“I'm sorry, there's someplace else I need to be.”

“What?” Chayele tilted her head in confusion.

Ruth took off running from the courtroom.

“Ruth, wait! Where are you going?” Lucy shouted.

The cold air invaded Ruth's nostrils and burned as it filled her lungs. She pushed her way through the crowds in the streets, her only priority to put distance between herself and the courthouse. Words echoed through her mind as she quickened her pace. She remembered Samuel's accusation a year ago of her living for the dead and how she'd dismissed it so quickly. Guilt contracted her gut as she remembered both Ester and Abraham begging her to stop pushing them all away.

She turned the corner to Orchard Street and saw the pushcart vendors all packing up for the day before darkness fell. She ran for the door to her building and took the stairs two at a time. Pushing open the door to the apartment she found Da and Mama seated at the kitchen table with the Sabbath candles between them. They looked up as she crossed the room and sat across from them. Without a word Da

reached across the table and took her hand in his. She squeezed his hand tightly and bowed her head as Mama lit the candles and Da began to recite the *Shabbat* prayers.

Ruth woke the next morning to her mother shaking her arm.

“Look, look! You need to see this!” Mama shook a newspaper in Ruth's face.

Ruth rubbed her eyes and yawned. “Just let me wake up first.”

She sat up on the cot in the kitchen and looked around her. Her parents' bedroom door stood open, Da must have already gone upstairs to visit Samuel. Chayele's snores could be heard from the couch in the parlor. She had snuck in late last night, no doubt having spent the majority of the night plotting some new revenge scheme with Lucy after the ruling.

Mama poured a cup of tea for Ruth and brought it to the kitchen table where she smoothed out the newspaper. She gestured for Ruth to come over.

Ruth sighed and dragged herself over to the table. Her eyes felt gritty and dry. She'd tossed and turned all night, thinking of the injustice of the verdict. She slumped into the chair and took a sip of the hot tea before glancing down at the *Yiddish Daily*. On the front page was a collage of photographs, one of which was her own face.

Mama grinned and pointed to her picture. “It's you!” she gushed. “They're calling you a hero.”

“A hero?” Ruth stuttered. “Why? They tossed out half my testimony.”

She focused on the headline before skimming through the rest of the article.

The Shirtwaist Kings Forced to Relinquish Their Crowns.

Mama slid into the chair across from Ruth. “See? You made a difference after all.”

Ruth leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms. “This just says the trial finally brought attention to their corruption. Most people already knew that.”

“Then you must not be reading the whole article, Ruth. It said a lot more than that. It's talking

about taking down the entire corrupt Tammany system. Everyone knows that judge was paid off. And by the reaction of people when that verdict was announced, they're no longer standing for it.”

Ruth sighed. “So what? They're going to start protesting like we did back in Russia? Try and take down the corrupt system? Weren't you all the ones lecturing me that the job would never be done, there would always be another enemy to fight?”

Mama nodded. “That is true. But perhaps this is finally different. They already formed that Factory Investigating Committee back in June. And they seem to be discussing some legitimate changes.”

Ruth gulped down the last of her tea and stood. She walked over to the stove and scooped a spoonful of the porridge waiting there into a bowl. Mama got to her feet and crossed over to put her hand on Ruth's arm.

“I don't know when you became so jaded, but this isn't you.” She waved a hand over towards the table. “That article commended you for your bravery in standing up to Max Blanck again. Change is happening. Those men might have walked free yesterday, but there is back-lash as a result of that ruling. And that in itself is progress.”

She dug into her pocket and pulled out two nickels. Sliding them onto the counter, she winked in Ruth's direction. She then leaned over and kissed Ruth on the cheek. “I'm proud of you. Why don't you and Chayele go out to the pictures tonight to celebrate? Try and start living again, ya?”

She turned and walked into her bedroom, leaving Ruth alone in the kitchen. Ruth rinsed her dirty bowl and stared down at the two nickels on the counter. Was Mama right? Had she become too jaded to see change occurring? After that verdict was announced yesterday, all she could think about was the wasted time and mess she'd made of everything. How she'd managed to ruin all that had been good in her life. But maybe it was time to make a fresh start. The nickelodeon might not be the clean slate she needed though. She had never gone without Abraham before.

She plopped back onto the cot to think and glanced down to her feet when some things from under the mattress fell out to the floor. Reaching down to gather them, she found the dime novel Filomena had given her two years before. Abraham must have stuffed it under there after he confiscated it. She still had yet to learn how to read in English. Leaning back on the pillow, she settled in to make herself comfortable and then opened the book to the first page.

VITA

The author was born and raised on Long Island, New York. She obtained her bachelor's degree in film production from Quinnipiac University in 2005. She joined the University of New Orleans creative writing graduate program to obtain her MFA and tap into her full potential as a writer. She resides in Burke, Virginia with her husband and works as a freelance writer for various publications.